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CAPTAIN BULLET, THE RAIDER KING; or, Little Topknot's Crusade.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "HIDDEN LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," "OLD FROSTY," "DANDY JACK," "KIT HAREFOOT," ETC.



THE DARE-DEVIL CAME NEARER AND NEARER; HIS FEARLESSNESS AND AGILITY AMAZED THE CLINGING GIRL.

Captain Bullet, THE RAIDER KING; OR, LITTLE TOPKNOT'S CRUSADE.

A Tale of the Wild Southwest.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "JUDGE
LYNCH JR.," "TORNADO TOM," "DANDY JACK,"
"ARKANSAW," "GOLD TRIGGER," "KIT
HAREFOOT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I THE RAID.

"SILVER VALLEY, cap'n. Isn't she a reg'lar beauty?"

The speaker and his companion had just reined in their handsome steeds on the summit of a lofty eminence from whence could be seen the most beautiful valley south of the Arkansas.

It lay like a gem at their feet with the dews of starry night still on its millions of grass blades, and dotted here and there with the buildings of ranches.

Silver Valley was a "reg'lar beauty" and no mistake.

"I'm not a great hand fur scenery, Texas," answered the man addressed as "cap'n," as his eyes took in the view beneath for a second. "Thar ar' things purtier to my eyes nor growin' grass an' herds ov long-horns. Fur instance, Texas, a purty hoss—"

"Like White Lightnin'," interrupted the listener.

"Now you've struck it, Texas. Yes, like White Lightning!" and the speaker's eyes, just visible beneath a pair of bushy brows, twinkled like stars. "Silver Valley ar' purty to me only because the best horse in the hull South-west eats its grass. He'll be mine afore two hours hez gone by. Bodine arn't lookin' fur such visitors as you an' I, Texas. We'll kind o' surprise 'im."

The man finished his sentence with the coarse laugh heard so often on the border, and the next moment the twain had left the halting place, and were riding toward the valley at the foot of the mountain chain.

They were large boned, muscular men of that type whose actions have given to the history of the South-west more than one page of crime and cunning. The one called cap'n was his companion's junior by several years. His clothes did not indicate that he was one of the noted characters of that locality; they were dark brown and rough in appearance, from his throat to the tops of his alligator-hide boots into which his pantaloons had been crammed. His features, while they denoted his character, like the preface of a book, were not unhandsome. His eyes were dark and piercing, and the only exhibition of hair on his face was a great bunchy mustache that covered his mouth. A hat like a New Mexican sombrero was his head-gear.

His companion called Texas was similarly clad.

The rising sun dissipated the dew as the couple rode across the little valley. They kept close together, seeing everything around them and occasionally they glanced at the heavy revolvers that made up a portion of their armament.

"What ef Bodine should recognize you, cap'n?" asked Texas, suddenly looking up into his companion's face.

They were approaching the dwellings of a well-to-do ranch.

"He'll recognize you, too, Texas," was the reply. "We haven't met fur years—not since we war rivals. Ha! ha!"

"Ov course he hezn't furgotten you. You ar' enemies still, and I'll bet my spurs—them ez I made Cavalry Bill pull off in the canyon—thet yer name, cap'n, is well known at the ranch. What d'ye say?"

"Perhaps, Texas," was the answer, accompanied by a smile that lifted the bushy mustache. "But whether he knows me er not, I'm goin' to hev White Lightnin' all the same; I'll hev the boss hoss ov Texas ef I've got to kill his owner!"

"Ov course; an' I'll jes' remark thet I'd like to hev a peep at Bodine's gal. She war a baby when I see'd er last; but that war twelve year ago. She used to stand on a block before the shanty, up on the Washita, a little thing ov six, and, ez I rode by on Black Bugle, I'd grab 'er up jes' like an Injun. Lor! how she'd laugh! She war purty then. I'll bet thet she's a reg'lar stunner now."

There was no reply to Texas's enthusiastic words for his companion had his keen eyes fixed on the house they were approaching.

As they rode up to the porch Texas slouched his hat over his eyes, while Captain Bullet slightly elevated the brim of his, as if he did not intend to hide his face from any one.

The house was unpretentious in looks, yet it indicated thriftiness. A porch shaded by the beautiful creepers of the South-west ran the whole length of the front, and it was before this that the pards drew rein.

"Hello!" shouted Texas, at a sign from Captain Bullet.

A moment later a figure appeared in the open doorway.

"The gal, by gracious!" ejaculated Texas, starting, and his eyes shot Captain Bullet a furtive glance.

That worthy had started, too, for the girl was very lovely, dressed as she was in a simple robe, that, while it concealed, revealed the voluptuousness of her figure.

"She war only a bud, twelve year ago; she's a full-blown rose now," was Texas's observation.

The girl seemed disagreeably surprised at the appearance of her visitors, and her eyes scrutinized them closely.

"Any hosses to sell or trade, my dew-drop?" asked Captain Bullet.

"Not this morning. Father drove off all he wants to dispose of at present, yesterday."

"The deuce! then Colonel Bodine is not on the ranch just now?"

"He is not at home."

"He hezn't sold thet boss animile ov his, hez he?"

The girl in the doorway started at this abrupt question, and her face seemed to lose some color.

"I refer to White Lightning," continued Bullet, before she could shape a reply. "No, ov course he hezn't parted with the hoss, an' since I'm hyar, I'd like to take a look at 'im."

"I never show White Lightning to strangers," answered the girl, quickly. "That is father's duty."

"We'll look at 'im ourselves. Whar is he?"

Bodine's daughter surveyed the men from head to foot, and as her eyes went downward, they rested for a second on their terrible revolvers.

"I can not break father's commands. I dare not show his favorite horse to you, but if you must see him, it shall be in my presence."

"We're goin' to see 'im whether you're nigh er not," flashed Captain Bullet. "The hoss hez a reputation thet extends all through these parts, an' I want to see 'im, an' to try 'im, perhaps."

As the last word left the man's lips, he wheeled his steed toward a pasture in which a number of horses were visible, among them one that looked like a skiff of snow from the house.

The girl stepped back into the house, but reappeared in an instant.

Her glance told her that the men had already discovered the coveted steed, and springing forward, she walked beside Captain Bullet toward the pasture.

Texas shot many a covert glance at the girl from beneath the rim of his sombrero. He could not keep his eyes from her, so beautiful she was in the pearly freshness of youth. As for Captain Bullet, he saw nothing but the white horse grazing in the field ahead.

The pasture was not large, and as they entered it, a number of horses raised their heads and looked at them.

Among this number was a large snow-white animal whose figure was equine perfection.

The sight of him drew from Captain Bullet an oath that crimsoned the girl's cheeks; but at the same time her eyes lit up with a flash of pride.

She was proud of White Lightning.

When the horse saw the girl he ambled forward with a joyous whinny, and when he came up he stopped and put down his head for a friendly stroke.

Captain Bullet and Texas exchanged glances at this moment. The eyes of the former said: "This horse is mine!"

"He's all they've said he was," said Bullet, suddenly addressing the ranchman's daughter. "He's the king of horses. I guess I'll take him!"

The significance of the last sentence could not be misunderstood.

Bessie Bodine started back, and fixed her eyes on the man.

"White Lightning is not for sale!" she cried.

"For sale, Dewdrop? Who talked ov buyin' 'im?"

"Oh! then you intend stealing him?"

"Call it what you will, White Lightning is mine!"

Quick as a flash after the last word Captain Bullet stripped the bridle from the head of the horse he rode, and sprung upon the white steed's back. The next instant the bit was in the captive's mouth.

"Hurrah! Come along, Texas!" he shouted, and almost before the girl could recover from the bold theft the thieves were dashing away followed by Bullet's own steed at full gallop.

Their departure roused the ranch-owner's child.

"Villains!" she exclaimed. "Because you have left me on foot, do you think to get away so easily with your prize? The warnings that have reached us were not idle ones as I now know, although he laughed at them. Yes, father laughed when he heard that Captain Bullet expressed a desire to own White Lightning. He owns him now, but not for long if the horse I want does his duty."

Bessie ran toward the little knot of horses that were gazing with necks extended at the thieves and their prize, and sprung upon the back of one.

A piece of stout cord which she drew from her pocket soon formed both bit and bridle, and the raiders were still in full view when the chase began.

Away went Bessie Bodine on a horse that seemed to possess the speed of the wind. Her long hair whipped from confinement by the morning breeze streamed behind her. She looked excited.

The horse that followed Captain Bullet and Texas, scarcely seemed to touch the ground. Bessie sat like a queen of the race-course. She gained on the raiders.

"She knew which horse to pick," said Bullet, looking over his shoulder. "He's a better one, I fear, than White Lightning, but not half so purty. We mustn't be bothered by the gal. I say we sha'n't be, Texas."

"But she'll overtake us."

"Ef you don't halt till she comes up an' give me time to get on," growled Bullet.

"I'll stop 'er, cap'n!"

The speed of Texas's horse slackened, but Captain Bullet kept on.

Texas turned and faced the girl, now coming forward like an arrow shot from an Indian bow.

Rising in his broad Mexican stirrups, he held up his bronzed hand.

"You can't stop me!" exclaimed Bessie, and the next instant the revolver that leaped from her pocket covered the raider's body.

She never stopped. Texas saw her movement and tried to avoid her bullet by dodging, but her finger touched the trigger as she thundered down upon him.

There was a puff of white smoke and a report, and Captain Bullet's partner reeled from his saddle and fell to the ground.

"Don't be a fool, Bessie Bodine," he shouted, as the girl dashed past. "The cap'n—Cap'n Bullet—will kill you before he gives the white hoss up."

"Then he shall kill me!" was the determined reply that came back.

The girl had not diminished the speed of her horse one jot.

Having placed one rascal hors *du combat*, she was flying on, pistol in hand, and with her eyes fixed on Captain Bullet.

CHAPTER II LITTLE TOPKNOT.

CAPTAIN BULLET was looking over his shoulder when Texas tumbled from his horse.

"Jehu!" he exclaimed; "the gal means business!" and then, turning his head again, he gave White Lightning a pair of spurs already red.

Bessie Bodine's flashing eyes and compressed lips told that she had determined to overtake the terror of the ranches, or perish in the attempt. She carried in her right hand the revolver before which Texas had fallen, and her finger was at the trigger, ready to send a bullet whizzing through Captain Bullet's brain.

"I don't want to be overtaken, only because I don't want to make Bodine childless," he murmured as he skimmed over the ground. "I didn't come hyar to kill a gal, but to steal a horse. I've done one ov the two things. I'd rather not do the other, ov course; but—"

The man paused abruptly, which was the same as though he had finished the sentence.

He was determined to escape with his prize even if he left Bessie dead among the flowers at Silver Valley.

Our heroine had not lost a foot of ground. She came on steadily, with her eyes fastened on the prey trying to escape with the best horse in the South-west; she saw only the dastardly rider.

All at once a cry parted her lips. A multitude of dark specks had appeared on the horizon far over Captain Bullet's shoulders. "Indians!" ejaculated Bessie turning slightly pale. "I must hasten on, or the Comanches will rob me of two things—revenge and White Lightning. On! on, Alamo! Do your duty like a horse of royal blood."

The animal had been straining every nerve from the outset of the chase; voice and spurs could not urge him into a greater effort.

Captain Bullet also saw the objects far away, for he stood erect in his stirrups, and was shading his eyes with his great bronzed hands.

"Ten thousand buffler!" he exclaimed almost at the same moment that Bessie had ejaculated "Indians!" "They'll get between me an' the camp before I can gain the ford. I've got to break fur the hills."

The "hills" were far to the horse-thief's right. On high ground he would be safe; where he was the approaching herd would certainly trample him beneath them, grind him to powder as it were.

The specks on the horizon had become a mass that seemed to extend for miles, and as Captain Bullet veered a little to the right he heard the faint detonations of rifles.

"Jes' ez I expected, Injuns behind them buffler!" he said to himself.

Bessie soon discovered that her prey was riding from the straight course he had held from the commencement of the race. She knew that, once among the hills, she would in all probability, lose him.

"I must catch him before he reaches the timber. The Comanches must not get between us!" she said.

Comanches? The girl's eye had deceived her, but not for long. A long distance stretched between her and Captain Bullet when she became undeceived. Rifle-shots and Indian yells had come over the advancing herd to her ears. A dozen puffs of smoke were continually rising over the backs of the buffaloes, and the immense herd, shaking the earth with its tread, was coming toward her with the awful certainty of doom.

The daring girl did not realize her new danger until escape seemed almost impossible.

"Fate favors the villain!" she exclaimed. "He is going to reach the hills while I must turn and fly for my life. Never mind, Captain Bullet, we will meet again. I'll keep a load in my revolver for you!"

The ranch-owner's daughter shot the escaping desperado a farewell glance and reined in her steed. The horse was glad to stop; his wind was gone; he had been terribly tried.

"We must go back, Alamo," Bessie said addressing him. "We were the hunters a minute ago; we are the hunted now."

The steed bounded forward at her command; he strained every nerve, but the thundering herd, bellowing like mad, gained on him.

Bessie looked back. Despite her courage, her cheeks blanched; a brave man would have groaned with despair.

One of the largest herds of buffaloes she had ever seen was upon her. Behind and on its flanks still rose Indian yells and the whip-like reports of rifles. She could see the figures of the red hunters rising and falling like the billows of an ocean.

And there was not a single opening in the shaggy ranks!

"Heaven help me!" involuntarily rose from Bessie's lips. "Alamo has been tried to his utmost. He is doing all he can now; but it will not save us."

This was true. The horse realized the danger that menaced him and needed no spurs to goad him to his utmost. With bloodshot eyes and heaving chest he was doing all he could, but all the time he was losing ground; his powers were completely spent.

"We'll die facing them, Alamo!" cried Bessie at last. "We'll turn and trust ourselves to the all-seeing eye."

She turned the horse which planted his front feet in the ground and snorted defiance at the herd. It was a terrible moment. The girl did not expect to escape.

"I'll do my best!" she cried leaning forward with the revolver in her hand. "They shall feel Bessie Bodine's welcome as they come up."

She could speak no more; the thousands were about to trample her to death.

Lowering the pistol, she fired once, twice, three times in rapid succession straight into the

faces of the leaders of the band, and then as the lowered heads were about to strike her steed she sprang up on his back and leaped over the front horns!

It was a terrible venture and one which she had formed in the twinkling of an eye.

Her leap carried her clear over the first rank, and she alighted among a lot of moving backs. The herd had already trampled Alamo to death and if she had not clutched a knot of hair upon which her hands fell she would have shared his fate!

Bessie was forced to drop her revolver in order to cling the closer to the buffalo, which all the while made desperate efforts to shake her off.

She clung to her new seat with all the energy of despair: it was her only hope, for to fall would be to die.

The excited herd thundered on, urged forward by the scarlet hunters mercilessly slaughtering those on the outside.

Suddenly a wild cry pealed from Bessie's throat.

A human being was approaching her, a person who bounded from back to back like one leaping from one cake of ice to another on a winter torrent.

The girl could not believe her eyes. There was some delusion; no person would be mad enough to attempt to cross the backs of a thousand enraged buffaloes.

Not the strange sight was no delusion. The leaper came nearer and nearer, as if he was on accustomed ground; his fearlessness and agility amazed the clinging girl.

In one hand he clutched a revolver.

He looked like a young Indian, for he wore several feathers in his hair; but all at once the girl started.

"A white boy!" she exclaimed. "Oh! heavens! the herd is dividing under his feet. He totters! he loses his footing! Now I am lost!"

Bessie Bodine shut her eyes, for a gap had suddenly yawned before the youth; she saw him stagger, and even heard his cry of surprise. But she did not see the wild leap he made all at once, nor see him clear the chasm to alight again on the backs beyond!

When she opened her eyes she saw the young adventurer bending over her.

"A white girl!" she heard him exclaim.

"Yes: I am Bodine's child."

The boy's eyes dilated.

"Then you must be gotten out of this," he said. "Let me keep you up."

Bessie did not need his assistance, but scrambled to her feet, and braced herself on the buffalo's back. He was a strong, manly youth, her would-be preserver, and from a quick glance over the herd his eyes returned to her.

"Have you been clinging to one buffalo all the time?" he asked.

"Yes."

Just as I thought. You have weakened him.

His companions have pressed past him."

"I did not notice that," replied Bessie. "I knew that I had to keep my perch or be trampled to death."

"Your buffalo is near the rear of the herd," continued the boy not noticing her last words.

"I think we can divide them now."

He stooped as he finished and thrust the revolver forward. The next moment a dull report was heard and a buffalo reeled. Although shot dead the huge animal was carried on a few feet by the impetuosity of his companions; but he broke the compact ranks.

"Are you ready?" cried the boy, looking into the gap thus formed.

Bessie said "Yes."

He lifted her from the back of the buffalo and sprang to the ground.

"Saved! thank Heaven!" she exclaimed.

Yes, she was saved, for the herd was thundering on, goaded to desperation by the Comanches who pursued to kill.

"So you are Bodine's child?" said the boy, looking into our heroine's face. "You are the Wild Rose of Silver Valley?"

"I never heard myself called thus before," said Bessie, blushing. "But who are you?"

"That's rather difficult to answer; I guess, though, that I'm who the Comanches say I am—Little Topknot. But let me question you. How came you to meet the herd?"

"I was following a horse-thief."

"A raider! Captain Bullet probably."

"Ah! it was that villain!"

The boy's eyes seemed to flash.

"What did he do?" he asked, trying to suppress rising anger.

"He took our best horse—White Lightning."

"White Lightning, eh?" echoed the youth, as if the name was not unfamiliar to him. "He's at his old tricks again. I would like to meet him. I owe him a debt that I'm itching to pay."

Bessie caught the boy's arm.

"Then you will help me?" she cried with enthusiasm. "We will hunt the miscreant together."

"I will stand by you through thick and thin; but we're going to tackle the greatest devil in the South-west. He's the chief of the Red Hoods they say."

Bessie's look now became an inquisitive stare. "The Red Hoods?" she echoed. "I never heard of them."

"Well I have," was the significant reply. "We'll know them before we get through with Captain Bullet. Mark my words. But my friends are coming back. They've given up the chase."

Bessie followed the boy's glance.

The red buffalo-hunters were coming back.

CHAPTER III.

AN ENFORCED BARTER.

THE sun was going down on the day that witnessed the events just recorded when a man, well mounted and accompanied by two cattle-herders halted before the most pretentious dwelling on Bodine's ranch.

One of the trio was Bodine himself, a stern-looking man of forty, with eyes like an eagle.

The door of his house stood open, but nobody ran out to welcome him home.

"I wonder where my pet is?" he ejaculated, as he dismounted. "She never served me this way before."

Still suspecting nothing, he took off the saddle-bags, that seemed to be very heavy, and entered the house. The herders exchanged glances, as if they had certain suspicions stowed away in their heads.

All at once Bodine rushed from the house with rage and disaster visible on his blanched face.

"Bessie hasn't been in the house since morning!" he said. "Something has happened. The pasture will prove it."

Bodine sprang past the rancheros, and ran toward the clearing. At sight of him a troop of horses came up as if for inspection.

"White Lightning isn't here, neither is Alamo," he said, after a look at the herd. "My child and my best horses have disappeared! Woe to the thieves!"

He went back to the house in a dazed sort of way. Jack Bodine loved the beautiful girl whom he called his daughter, and the image of the wife he had won with knife and pistol in his wild days on the Mexican border.

The herdsman had not followed him to the pasture, but awaited his return before the rancho.

"Go and get fresh horses—at once!" said Bodine. "My child has been carried off. I think I know where to find her."

One of the men was so inquisitive as to ask: "Where?"

"You shall discover, if you do not prove cowards!" was the reply. "Did you ever see that before?" and he held up to their gaze a silver whistle.

The two rancheros shook their heads.

"Never heard it, either?"

Another shake.

"Well, I have! Captain Bullet, my old friend, didn't know when he rode away with Bessie and White Lightning that he was leaving a clew behind. We are going straight to his camp. What! are you afraid to follow me?"

The men had started at the great horse-thief's name, hence Bodine's question.

"If you don't want to go, I'll leave you here to take care of the ranch," he continued. "I'd just as soon go alone anyhow. Yes, you will stay here."

Then the herdsman united in a protest; but the ranch owner silenced them in a moment.

"I shall go alone! You don't like to face Captain Bullet. I see that. His grave yards are not very numerous in this country, but then I wouldn't lose a drop of your blood for the world."

The cutting irony of Bodine's remarks had no effect on the bronzed listeners, and unable to keep his temper before their display of cowardice, he went into the house.

Night had now thrown her mantle over the face of nature. Bodine went to his private room and struck a light. As the match revealed the apartment he started back with a light cry. It had been plundered!

On the floor lay several bloody cast off bandages; there were clots of gore on the carpet. A

wound had been dressed there, but whose wound, and by whom dressed? It was a mystery that puzzled Bodine. He made a hasty examination of the papers scattered around the room; on every one touched by the plunderer were bloody finger-marks, showing that whoever had dressed the wound had also examined them.

"They have been taken, the papers that I value so highly!" he suddenly exclaimed. "If my girl knew their contents her whole life would become embittered. She would not meet me with a smile any more. I doubt whether she would prefer me to that devil Captain Bullet. Why didn't I destroy those papers long ago? Like a fool I kept them that I might be ruined in the end, that my own house might unite in my overthrow. What shall I do now?"

He sprang up like a tiger. "There is but one thing left me to do, and that is to follow the man who robbed me of my papers and to take them from him, dead or alive. But who took them? Captain Bullet? I think not. He hasn't been here. Bessie would have shot him dead on the threshold of this chamber. She knew that I never allowed anybody to enter here, not even herself. But the thief came here after the raid with his surgeon, and stole the papers. Perhaps he was his own surgeon. I should not be surprised. The bandages tell me that it was a bungled job."

Bodine said no more, but restored the documents to the case from which they had been taken, and left the room. Anticipating his wants, one of the herdsmen held the bridle of a horse before the house. A single bound carried the ranch-owner to the saddle.

"When I come back, I'll have all that belongs to me!" he said in a mad, hoarse voice to the man. "I've lost more than you think I have, Pecos. There was something as precious as Bessie, and I've been robbed of that too. Good-bye!"

He touched his steed with the spurs and the night soon hid Bodine from the rancheros' eyes. He rode in a north-westerly direction looking up occasionally as though he was guiding himself by the stars. He was crossing the bewitching expanse of Silver Valley, and his horse was carrying him along at a lively gait.

The first five miles were quickly ridden over, so were the next, and the next. Bodine's face had become set. He was a man with a mission, and a terrible one at that. Now and then he talked aloud as if he addressed somebody riding at his side, and a hundred times he swore—not to rescue Bessie—but to reclaim the stolen papers, and to bullet-bore the thief!

Jack Bodine was at the end of his sixteenth mile when a summons heard every night and day on the South-western borders struck his ears.

"Halt!"

The horse stopped without being checked by the rein. Bodine drew his revolver and cocked it. Oiled though the lock was, its faint click was heard.

"No foolishness, Jack Bodine!" said a rough voice that emanated from a huge head that appeared between him and the stars. "I've got the Texan drop on you. Ef it war a leetle lighter you might look down the muzzle ov my weepun an' diagnose yer case. I've got you whar more'n one man would like to hev you ef yer papers tell the truth."

Bodine started and seemed to gasp.

What did this mysterious personage know about his papers? Might he not be the thief himself?

"I kinder surprise you, I guess," resumed the unknown. "Anyway, I saw you flinch when I mentioned the papers. What would you give fur 'em, Jack?"

That question dissipated every doubt.

The man was the thief.

Stalwart, like a giant, he sat on his motionless horse with his revolver at Bodine's head.

"Have you got my papers?" asked the ranchman of Silver Valley.

"Ef I hev'n't what would I know about 'em? Now, let's come to business at once. What'll you give fur 'em?"

Jack Bodine bit his lip. He wanted his papers, but he wanted, also, to kill the thief.

"Wal, ef you won't buy 'em I'll take 'em to somebody that will. I know the value ov 'em jes' as well ez you do."

The threat parted Bodine's lips. "What will you take for them?" he snapped.

"More'n you'd be willing to give, mebber," was the reply accompanied by a laugh.

"Name your price."

"Wal, it's yer gal, Jack."

"Bessie Bodine?"

"Ov course! You want the papers. I want the Wild Rose ov Silver Valley. We kin both be suited ef you act reasonably. What do you say?"

A sudden thought seemed to flash across Bodine's mind. At any rate his face brightened.

"I agree," he said. "Give me the papers."

He put forth his hand as he spoke.

"I can't do that. I can't give you the documents and wait till I git the gal. Oh, no! I must hev the one before you touch the other. I've got an eye on business, Jack Bodine. The gal, then the papers! I don't want her fur speculation; I want to marry her; I—"

Bodine bent eagerly forward; he thought the man was going to mention his own name; but he was not rewarded. The sentence was not finished.

"I can't give you Bessie; she is not here now," said the ranch-owner.

"All you hev to do is to say that I shall hev her in exchange fur the papers. I'll find her."

"Then you know where she is?"

"I'll find her!" was the emphasized repetition.

"Curse you, whoever you are, you've got the advantage of me!" grated Bodine.

"Which means that you'd like to hev me at the muzzle ov yer revolver jes' one second."

"I would, by the eternal!"

"You wouldn't get them papers ef you did."

"I'd be satisfied, anyhow."

"Come, Jack. So I'm to understand that we've made a bargain? The gal fur the papers."

"Yes."

"When I've found the former you'll get the latter; not one minute sooner. Don't foller me. It might be onhealthy."

The speaker's horse whirled, he threw himself along the neck like a Comanche, and Jack Bodine sat in his saddle listening to the wild gallop that carried the unknown away.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN BULLET'S WORD.

WHILE Bodine sat on his horse like a person bewildered, the man to whom he had promised his daughter Bessie in exchange for the compromising documents was going over the ground as fast as a horse could carry him.

A haughty smile wreathed his lips and there was a flash of triumph in his eyes.

"Jack weakened when I threatened to show the papers to them ez would like to see the same," said this man to himself. "Thar's more'n one skeleton in closets, even hyar in Texas. Now, to keep my part ov the bargain good, I must find the gal, an' in order to be able to do that I must first find the cap'n. But what ef Bessie overtook him?—yes, what ef he shot 'er? Then, by Jehu, I'll pistol him; that's all!"

The speaker rode all night, and the first flushes of the new day saw him enter a camp on the Washita. It was a long way from Silver Valley.

His horse was well blown, and a dozen burly and roughly dressed men greeted him with exclamations of genuine surprise.

"When did you rise from the dead, Texas?" was the prevailing question that saluted his ears. "The cap'n says he left you fur dead in Silver Valley; an'—"

"Whar's the cap'n?"

"Down yonder goin' crazy over thet wonderful hoss. He hezn't left the critter fur a minute since he came back to camp. He talks nothin' but hoss; you can't get his mind onto any thing else; no use tryin'. I guess we'll hev to kill the animile in order to bring the cap'n to his senses."

The speaker laughed at the close of the last sentence.

"Ef you don't thet hoss'll be the death ov him," remarked Texas, turning from the group. "I'll go down an' see the cap'n, an'," significantly, "I'll make him talk suthin' else besides hoss."

Texas knew where to find the man he wanted, for he scaled a little knoll to the left of the camp and uttered an oath indicative of disgust as he looked upon the scene below.

Leaning complacently against a tree, with his arms folded on his broad chest, and with his eyes fixed on a noble white horse tethered in front of him, was the king of raiders, Captain Bullet. His eyes had the look of greedy triumph that misers have when they survey their gold; and Texas saw at once that his infatuation had not been everdrawn.

"I'll break yer dream, cap'n," muttered Texas, descending. "You'll want to talk hoss—that's nat'ral under the circumstances—but jes' now I prefer another subject."

A minute later the two men stood face to face.

Captain Bullet was surprised to see alive and before him the man he had left for dead the day before.

"I hev'n't got much use ov my left arm at present," exclaimed Texas. "It bled like Jehu an' then I hed to dress it myself. The galswept down on me like a thunderbolt. She never heeded my orders, an' the last I see'd her she war ridin' arter you, cap'n."

Captain Bullet smiled.

"But thet hoss was too much for her," exclaimed the raider, turning to White Lightning.

"Look at that neck, Texas, an' those eyes!"

"Good I'll admit, cap'n; but I'm kinder interested in the gal."

"I've looked him all over, an' thar isn't a blemish on him," continued Bullet. "He outwinded my horse long before we struck the camp; he—"

"Cap'n!" interrupted Texas in a tone that could not be disregarded. "I'm hyar arter information an' when you hev imparted it you kin look at thet piece ov hoss flesh till Gabriel's horn calls Texas to jedgment. Whar is the gal?"

"I don't know."

"Whar did you leave 'er?"

"Ridin' fur life from before ten thousand buffler."

Texas gasped.

"Honest Injun, cap'n?—you didn't kill her?"

"She didn't come within revolver-shot, er I might," was the reply.

"Tell me about the buffler," said Texas.

In a few words, while he kept his eyes fixed on the wonderful horse, Captain Bullet related his adventures since his separation from his companion in the theft. Texas listened silently, without losing a word. He knew that the King of the Raiders was speaking the truth. Captain Bullet's manner of speech was proof of this.

"Now tell me whar you saw the gal last," said Texas, at the conclusion of the narrative.

The raider did so.

"Now look at the hoss to yer satisfaction, cap'n," said Texas, turning away. "But, don't you think he'll prove the costliest thing you ever owned?"

"Why, Texas?"

"You know Jack Bodine?"

"Ov course I do, an' he knows Captain Bullet, late ov Taos."

"Will thet knowledge prevent him from tryin' to git White Lightning back?" queried Texas.

"Will it keep him from huntin' you with his finger on his trigger, an' his eyes s'archin' fur yer heart? Thet white hoss, purty ez he is, cap'n, ar' goin' to prove the most troublesome piece ov animile flesh you ever saw. I'm no prophet, but you kin mark my words all the same. They sha'n't cost you a red."

Sparks of fire seemed to flash from Bullet's eyes. He took a stride forward, actually turned his back on White Lightning, and laid his bronzed hand on Texas's shoulder.

"I've r'iled the old man," said the wounded man. "It's comin' now."

"You're a prophet ov evil, Texas!" began the raider king; "but I don't care a snap fur yer words. I want Jack Bodine to hunt his horse. I'm goin' to send 'im word to-morrow thet I own the best animal on the Texas border, an' thet I'm goin' to keep 'im in spite ov everything. Won't you carry the message?"

"Me? I've got other business to 'tend to. Carry it yerself, cap'n."

"I will!" cried the raider. "By Jehu! I'll deliver my own message to Jack Bodine, an' thet from the back ov White Lightning. Thar's a grudge between us thet hez to be settled."

"You would kill 'im, I s'pose," remarked Texas.

"Worse than that!"

"You'll do no sich thing with Jack Bodine until the trade between us hez been made."

Captain Bullet opened his eyes.

"I'll kill 'im on sight!" he flashed, his face growing darker.

"Then, cap'n, you'll never git to ride White Lightning long."

An oath fell from Bullet's lips, and, springing back, he laid his hand on the butt of a revolver that protruded above his belt.

There was a menace in Texas's look as well as in his words.

"We've been pards fur fifteen year, cap'n," he continued, calmly. "We've hunted, stole an' killed together; but when I say thet ef you kill Jack Bodine afore I give you leave to, I'll kill you, I mean every word ov the remark!"

Texas had stepped forward; the faces of the two men almost touched.

"I'll do as I please," grated Captain Bullet.

"We'll see!" exclaimed Texas, and the next

moment his huge revolver was held against White Lightning's head.

A single bound had carried him to the horse! Captain Bullet uttered an exclamation of horror, and every vestige of color left his face.

"You wouldn't kill the horse, Texas?" he gasped.

"Try me! Draw yer weepun, er say ag'in that you'll do ez you please. Jes' repeat that remark ef you want to test the matter. I've transformed you into a tombstone, hev I? You ought to hev the words 'Scared to death' carved on your forehead!"

These were bitter words for Captain Bullet to listen to, but what else could he do? The bronzed finger of Texas was on the trigger, and a slight pressure would send a ball whizzing through the white horse's head.

"What'll you do, cap'n?" queried Texas. "Will you refuse to kill Jack Bodine until I say 'kill' er—"

"I promise."

"Sw'ar!"

The oath of the border fell from the raider's lips.

The menacing revolver dropped, and Texas stepped back. As he did so the eyes of the twain met. They understood one another; they were friends no longer, but enemies.

Not another word passed between them. Texas went over the knoll.

"Now fur the gall!" he exclaimed. "Now fur the Wild Rose ov Silver Valley, who is to be the wife of Texas."

He left the raider's camp as silently as he had entered it one hour before. He rode a fresh horse in whose limbs speed and strength were combined. The morning winds lifted the brim of his sombrero, and toyed with the long hairs of his handsome mustache. Despite his dress, he looked like some modern Adonis. But he was a devil.

He had scarcely disappeared before Captain Bullet astonished the denizens of the camp by appearing among them mounted on White Lightning.

"To horse! thirteen ov you!" he exclaimed, and in less than ten minutes he was surrounded by a baker's dozen of the terrors of the Texas ranchos.

"Hev you got yer hoods?" he queried.

Thirteen different voices said:

"Yes."

"We are goin' to visit the king ov Silver Valley—the renowned Jack Bodine," he went on. "I want to tell him that I'm the man what stole his horse, an' then I'm goin' to blow his brains out!"

The thirteen exchanged looks. "Now we're off!" shouted Bullet as he touched the white horse with a spur and away the wild band went down a river path.

"He forced me to sw'ar with his revolver at White Lightning's head," grated the raider king as he was borne along at the head of his desperate thirteen. "I have no regard for such oaths, not the slightest; an' I'm goin' to kill Bodine jes' to give Texas a chance to do his worst."

The way to the picturesque ranch in Silver Valley was known to every thief that followed Captain Bullet. They had seen it a thousand times, and as often had longed to plunder it and give it to the torch.

The sun was going down the western slope of the skies when fourteen grotesque objects well mounted neared the ranch.

They were men who wore red hoods that effectually concealed the face. The only openings in the masks were peep-holes for the eyes. They drew rein before the building.

"Hello!" shouted the leader of the band.

A man appeared on the porch, but at sight of the dreaded party he uttered a wild cry and retreated. But a revolver had already covered him.

"Whar's Bodine?" demanded Captain Bullet.

"He left the ranch last night. He is still away."

"You lie! I'll bring him out."

The next second the outstretched revolver spoke, and the man on the porch dropped in his tracks with a bullet in his brain!

CHAPTER V. ROBBING A THIEF.

It was murder but that was nothing new for the raider king. If Bodine was anywhere about the premises the pistol shot would be certain to bring him out; but its echoes were the only sounds that saluted the ears of the thirteen.

"Went off last night, eh?" ejaculated Captain Bullet, recurring to the murdered herder's last words. "He's huntin' his white hoss some-

whar, I s'pose. I'll jes' leave a line fur 'im, one that he'll be sure to see ef he gits back hyar alive."

The speaker produced from underneath his jacket a piece of paper large enough to hold in his bold chirography the words "Compliments of Captain Bullet." Leaping from his horse, he approached the dead man and pinned the paper to the lifeless breast with one of the terrible bowie-knives of the South-west.

Then away went the Red Hoods headed by their leader chuckling over the welcome that would greet Bodine should he ever return alive to the rancho.

They did not draw rein again until they reached the little camp near the Wishita, where the horses were unsaddled and turned out to graze.

Captain Bullet led White Lightning to the beautiful spot below the hill where he had held his last interview with Texas, and there until the wee sma' hours of the night he remained rubbing his prize's faultless limbs. He knew that he had the best horse south of the Arkansas, and one which he had coveted a long time.

"What did Texas say about this hoss becomin' troublesome to me?" asked the captain of himself, as he paused a moment at his labors. "A trouble? I'd like to see somebody try to take 'im from me. I would, by Jehu!"

"Then you won't trade under any circumstances?" said a voice at his elbow.

Bullet wheeled upon the speaker, who stood like a statue against the nearest tree.

"Who are you, and when did you come?" he demanded, as he drew and cocked a revolver.

"I've been hyar an hour more'n less," was the answer. "I'm on a hoss expedition up the Washita. My handle is Tom Savage, commonly called Comanche Tom whar I'm best known."

Bullet was not satisfied; his eyes tried to read the speaker's heart, and his finger twitched at the trigger of the revolver.

"You've been watchin' me then?" he flashed.

"I couldn't help it, cap'n, fur it's a mighty valuable hoss thet a man rubs down at midnight; a critter worth his weight in gold, I should say."

The raider king glanced furtively at his prize.

"A likely hoss mine is," he said, assuming a careless manner. "Whar's yours?"

"A piece down the river. I didn't think I war so nigh a camp till I heard you talkin' to yer hoss while you rubbed 'im down. I know you jes' ez well ez ef I war one ov yer boys. When I see'd you I said: 'Thar's Cap'n Bullet, the man I saw clean out the Rio Dolores in Santa Fe.'"

"War you thar?" asked the captain, quickly.

Comanche Tom nodded.

"Don't you want to jine my gang? Lots ov good hosses like thet one in this kentry. I like to hev my friends ov the Rio Dolores fracas with me."

"I can't jine," was the answer, which seemed to add a malicious flash to Captain Bullet's look. "I'll go back to my hoss an' proceed. I didn't expect to find you in this kentry, cap'n, but since I've met ye, I'm glad to leave you prosperin'. Lots ov hosses like thet one hyar, you say? Jes' whar might I light on one?"

"At nearly any ranch in Silver Valley."

Tom Savage for the first time started.

"Am I nigh thet place?" he asked.

"Yes, but why?"

"Never mind, cap'n. I'll jes' go on my way rejoicin'."

The man drew back with his keen eyes fixed on the raider king, and vanished like a specter; in other words he seemed to dissolve in thin air.

"What makes me so narvous?" exclaimed Bullet when he found himself alone. "I've seen them eyes afore, but not in Comanche Tom's head ez I knows of. Ef he war at the Rio Dolores thet night he might know more than I want 'im to. Every now an' then some feller turns up what war thar. I've killed ten ov 'em fur dead men tell no tales, an' now I'm faced by another. He showed sense when he refused to jine my gang fur he'd sign his death warrant by doin' so. Got a hoss down the river didn't he say? He's capable ov lyin' an' I'm a fool ef I leave him escape me now."

With a glance at White Lightning Captain Bullet glided away in the direction taken by his unexpected visitor. The night was not very dark, and he could see his way quite well.

As he moved toward the river he carried a cocked revolver in his hand and his ears were on the alert for sounds. But Tom Savage, whoever he was, had eluded him. He was not at the river, and after cursing him in the pale

moonlight on the bank, the raider king went back.

"The man war a fool to think thet I'd trade White Lightning fur another piece ov horse-flesh," he said as he approached the place where he had left the prize. "Mebbe he thinks ov comin' back an' stealin' 'im, er perhaps—"

The sentence was not completed.

Captain Bullet stopped and turned white, his eyeballs seemed ready to leap from his head, for on the spot where he had left Bodine's horse there was nothing. Nothing? Yes, a piece of rein hung from a tree; that told the tale!

White Lightning had been stolen from him!

Bullet stood like a dazed madman for a moment. He could not realize that the wonderful horse was not before him; but the cut strap brought him to his senses, and a minute later the little glade rung with the most terrible imprecations that ever disturbed its serenity.

Captain Bullet was now a madman in reality. He saw that Tom Savage had outwitted him, for he doubted not the identity of the man into whose hand White Lightning had fallen.

What if it was past midnight? He roused the camp and horrified its inhabitants with an account of the daring theft.

"To horse!" he thundered. "We'll chase thet thievin' skunk to the rockies but what we catch 'im. Tom Savage! War at the Rio Dolores he said. I want every man what war thar!"

The horse-thief's followers always obeyed his commands. In less than five minutes thirteen mounted men were at his disposal. It was now near day.

"Afore we go I want to ask one question," said Bullet addressing his men. "Did any ov ye ever hear ov Comanche Tom?"

"I did, cap'n," said one.

"Well?"

The raider king faced the speaker.

"Whar did you see him last?"

"Dead in the Red Hills kentry!"

"Dead," exclaimed Bullet starting. "Don't talk about suthin' you can't substantiate. Comanche Tom ar' no more dead than I am at this minute."

"Then ef a man kin git a new set ov brains an' resume bizness arter he bez lost the first supply, I'd like to know the receipt; thet's all, cap'n!"

Bullet drew a long breath and then leaned toward the man who had just spoken.

"You mean well enough, Sam," he said; "but I beg leave to inform you thet Comanche Tom war hyar an hour ago an' stole White Lightning!"

"An' I want ter tell you, once fur all, cap'n, that I killed Comanche Tom in the Red Hills kentry five year ago too dead to skin! I know what I'm talkin' erbout!"

The chief of the horse-stealers straightened slowly.

"Then who stole the white hoss?" he cried.

"Thet's what I'd like to know since I killed Comanche Tom, myself, an' I never had to shoot a feller twice, never, cap'n. War the thief a tall man?"

"Not over five-seven."

"That settles it. Tom Savage war six-one in his moccasins."

"Then I'm goin' to know who deceived me!" roared Bullet. "Whoever he is, he knew thet I didn't know Comanche Tom. It warn't very light whar I met 'im but still thar war suthin' about his eyes thet looked natural. He's my enemy. Now we'll find 'im!"

Reins were hastily gathered up, and the band was about to leave the raiders' camp when a loud voice startled every one.

"Injuns!"

Captain Bullet's men looked at their leader.

"They come at a bad time," he said, in no good-humor, between his teeth. "Whar ar' they?"

"Jest over yonder. They're Comanches, I take it, ef I kin see the sign the chief holds up."

Every raider looked over the speaker's arm. Morning was breaking once more and on the summit that overlooked the camp appeared the apparition of a horse and his rider outlined against the lightning sky.

"It's Black Mustang!" ejaculated Bullet after a glance. "Thar's no tellin' how many braves back 'em! He's holdin' up a buffler tail. I know the signal."

Up went Captain Bullet's right hand, and the red-skin disappeared.

A minute later the hill top bristled with mounted Indians, and, with a hundred wild yells, a vast cavalcade dashed down upon the camp.

The raider-king watched them for a moment

from beneath his shaggy brows, and then a start-ling cry escaped him.

"Curse my luck!" he said. "The buffers didn't kill the gal, arter all, fur hyar she comes, right down into my camp!"

CHAPTER VI.

A BOY AVENGER.

WE left Bessie Bodine, as the reader will recollect, on the plain just after her timely rescue from the buffaloes by the white boy who called himself Little Topknot, and now we see her riding with the Comanche band into the camp of the raiders.

She had discovered that her rescuer was an important person among the red-skins, many of whom treated him with a deference due only, one would have supposed, to their leader, Black Mustang. She had already been made acquainted with a portion of the boy's life. She knew that he was one who had cause to hate Captain Bullet. If he was a foundling, he was also a chief—a boy chief—among the Comanches.

Since her rescue she had scarcely once thought of her home; for but one desire had animated her, the recovery of White Lightning the equine king of the southwestern borders. Therefore, Little Topknot had induced her to postpone her return home, for he promised to hunt with and for her, and his speech to the red buffalo-hunters had enlisted them in her cause.

These events in brief account for Bessie's appearance on the outskirts of Captain Bullet's camp. The amazement of the leader of the Red Hoods was indescribable. He had last seen her doomed to death by a thousand Indian-hunted buffaloes; now she was entering his camp if not for revenge, for what?

"Thar be fifty Comanches behind Black Mustang," said Captain Bullet, addressing his men. "It's a huntin' an' not a war party, but they may be bent on mischief all the same. Watch 'em, an' watch me, too. Ef I lift my right hand proceed to bizness. Don't miss a shot an' shoot fast. We wiped out forty Snakes once in five minutes. Now hyar they ar'."

The raider could say no more, for the Comanches were before him and the stalwart figure and haughty countenance of Black Mustang rose from the saddle directly in front of him.

"Well?" began the captain. "To what circumstances ar' we indebted fur this visit?"

Black Mustang rose in his stirrups.

"The white girl wants her horse," he said, sending a quick glance at Bessie, whose eyes were flashing a world of hatred at the raider.

"Her hoss?" echoed Bullet, in his rough, insulting tone. "I hev'n't got the gal's hoss."

"You stole him, at any rate!" flashed the ranchman's daughter. "You and one of your tools invaded the pasture the other day and forcibly took White Lightning from it. Do not lie to me, Captain Bullet. I witnessed the theft, but had it not been for the buffaloes, I would not be here demanding the return of our property, nor would you be capable of telling a falsehood. Give me back the horse, and we will let the future pay the debt of vengeance."

While the girl spoke every eye was fastened upon her. She never took hers one second from the person she addressed.

"Thar's my camp," said Captain Bullet, waving his bronzed hand toward the raiders' retreat. "Go an' s'arch it. Ef you find yer hoss he's yours, but I'll say hyar that you'll not find 'im."

"You've hidden him in anticipation of my visit."

The man laughed.

"I thought you war dead!" he said, gruffly. "But, since you ar' hyar, I grant you the freedom ov Camp Washita. Go an' look fur yer hoss, my Valley Rose."

"Your eagerness tells me that search would prove fruitless," she returned. "I am here to find or to kill. Captain Bullet, I am not friendless. The red warriors you see behind me are my allies. Now where is my horse? Stop! don't lift your right hand—the old signal to your killers."

The last words came over a revolver which had suddenly covered Captain Bullet's head. It was held by Bessie Bodine's hand, and he was looking into it with a thousand fears.

The lifting of that weapon had caused others to leap upward. Without orders the thirteen had drawn their pistols; but not one was raised against the girl, for their leader's life hung on a thread.

"My horse! quick! where is he?" demanded the girl.

"I don't know," snapped Captain Bullet. "What a man don't know, he can't tell, kin he?"

"You know, sir."

"Ask my men."

"He doesn't know, thet's a fact," said one burly fellow. "The hoss war stolen from the camp about an hour ago."

"Stolen, and by whom?" asked the girl.

"Thet's the question; the thief called himself Comanche Tom; but—"

"Comanche Tom!" echoed a voice at Bessie's right. "Tom Savage alive? Impossible!"

The eyes of the raiders were turned upon the speaker. He looked like an Indian boy of seventeen, but his voice and his eyes told more than one that underneath the paint on his face was a skin as white as theirs.

When Captain Bullet's gaze rested on the boy his eyes said: Who are you? But the youth continued before his lips could frame the question he evidently desired to ask.

"The thief was not Comanche Tom," he said. "Tom is dead. He died at the foot of Dead Chief Mountain in the Red Hills country."

"You're right thar, youngster!" exclaimed a raider. "Comanche is dead, fur I wiped 'im out."

"You? Who are you?" exclaimed the boy, our friend Little Topknot.

"Sam Yost, or Silver Sam ov Shasta ten year ago."

"And you killed Comanche Tom?"

"I did, by hokey!"

"Then I'm going to kill you!"

The boy raised his arm as he uttered the last word. Sam Yost did the same, but the avenger was too quick for him; and as the youth's revolver cracked the body of one of the Red Hoods fell from his horse!

It was a vengeance as swift as it was terrible! The twelve raiders glanced at their leader. His face was white, his eyes flashed fire; but the resolute girl still covered him!

"I am Comanche Tom's avenger!" said the boy, addressing the startled raiders. "I have a right to be such, and the man who questions that right will follow the murderer from Shasta. So the man who came and stole the white horse from Captain Bullet called himself Tom Savage, eh? He lied; I buried Tom myself where I found him dead with his brains on the leaves. I am no Indian as you men know by this time; but when you touch me you touch the whole Comanche nation! I ought to kill that man Bullet. Of all the pistols in the South-west mine has the best right to his brains."

Captain Bullet started and grated his teeth.

"Take 'em!" he cried. "I'm defenseless. Murder me like you've jes' murdered Sam Yost."

"No! Let the future bring us together!" was the response.

"Jes' ez you like," said the raider, "not ez I care particularly; but why you hate me I can't imagine."

"You can't, eh?" roared Little Topknot. "Look back and see whether you ever left a baby boy fastened to a bare rock two thousand feet above the sea level for the eagles and the kites; and ask yourself if you did not kill a man named Colonel Santa Fe in the infamous Rio Dolores on that night which all who were there will never forget. What do you say, Captain Bullet?"

The raider could not speak. His look was a stare, and he seemed on the point of reeling from his saddle.

"Convicted!" cried the boy, covering the Red Hood chief with accusing finger. "Convicted and condemned. I am the boy left to the mercies of the scavengers of the air, and I am the son of Colonel Santa Fe. You seem to see all, now! You believe that Comanche Tom saved me from the kites. He did, and that is why you man lies at his horse's feet with a bullet in his head! I don't want you now, Captain Bullet; but my time will come."

A terrible impulse of rage drove the border horse-thief erect in his stirrups despite the pistol that still covered him. He no longer saw the ranchman's daughter, cool, collected, and with outstretched revolver; the statue-like Comanches also seemed to confront him no longer; he saw only the boy avenger.

"So, you ar' the boy I gave to the birds?" he roared. "You are Santa Fe's son? I war a fool to leave you on the rock without a bowie in yer breast; but the matter can't be helped now. You want my life? Take it now, boy, fur by the eternal! after this day I will proceed to finish the job I bungled above the clouds! Take it now, ef you want it!"

"No!" said Little Topknot, resolutely. "I want to take it under other circumstances."

"You will never take it then."

"We shall see."

"Tech Captain Bullet, an' we'll bore you with leaden augers!" burst from the throat of one of the thirteen.

"You will?" cried the boy whirling upon the speaker. "You will become his avengers, eh? I have taken no vow against you, but I accept the hate you give me, and I swear that from this day you are doomed men, every one of you! You may not have been on the mountain when I was fastened to the rock, but some of you may have been at the Rio Dolores. Lower your pistol!" he said to Bessie. "We can do nothing more here. Black Mustang has some business with Captain Bullet."

The chief of the raiders seemed relieved when the girl's revolver had ceased to cover him; but his brow darkened when he saw Bessie and his young enemy withdraw. For a moment he and his men exchanged significant glances, and more than once his right hand seemed on the point of being raised to give the signal for fight; but the rank of stalwart red-skins between him and the young couple kept the member down.

If he attacked the Comanches he might lose White Lightning, and his chances for getting even with the boy.

Little Topknot and our heroine rode over the hill down which the red band had galloped a short time before. Not a word was spoken until they had reached a spot half a mile from the raiders' camp.

"You failed, Bessie," said the boy. "The white horse is still lost."

"Yes. Did you believe him?" she asked with eagerness.

"I believed him. The man who stole him was not Comanche Tom, for he is dead. I am burning to know who he is. I will know! You want to return to Silver Valley do you not?"

"Only for a season. Father will miss me; he will become wild."

"Then we will go down to the valley."

She looked at him.

"Of course I'm going with you," he said, answering her look. "Your foes are mine now, are they not?"

Bessie did not reply, and they rode off together.

At the first stream the boy removed the paint from his face and became himself again.

"Ah! Silver Valley!" suddenly exclaimed the girl.

The next moment the sharp report of a rifle awoke the echoes of the gulch from which they were just emerging, and as Little Topknot pitched forward with a groan, Bessie's horse plunged away like mad. The sudden lunge unseated her, but she clung to the heavy mane, and was forced along at a rate that made her brain reel.

She could not look back, but a horseman was following her just the same. He was a bronzed-faced, rough-looking athlete, who rode like a person born in the saddle. As he neared Bessie the smile of victory broadened on his face, and when he darted at her horse's rein, he laughed.

His strength alone checked the frightened steed.

Bessie looked up and saw a face not altogether unfamiliar—that of Captain Bullet's companion in his raid on the rancho!

Yes, her captor was Texas.

"A fool fur luck!" he ejaculated. "Jack kin hev the papers now fer I've got the gal!"

CHAPTER VII.

ONE PART OF THE TRADE KEPT.

"By Jove! it was a trick that succeeded! I didn't kill the rascal although I had him in my power. I'm leaving him for the future. One of these days I'll bring him down at the head of his raiders. Then I will laugh to see him throw up his hands and fall backward with a death-yell! I had him last night; yes, I had him under my revolver, five minutes, and yet I didn't drop the dog. I contented myself with robbing him of this horse. Now he will hunt me. So, Comanche Tom, you'll have to look out for your carcass."

The speaker was approaching Bodine's rancho on the morning after the theft of White Lightning from Captain Bullet.

A great bronzed fellow he was. His face was covered by a dark beard that resembled the matted mane of a lion. He rode the famous horse once the pride of Jack Bodine's rancho in Silver Valley, and the animal galloped over the plain as if proud to carry the man he bore.

Before the rancho the man dismounted and

sprung upon the porch, to start back with an exclamation of surprise, and to stare at a body lying in the shadows of the vines with a bowie buried to the hilt in the lifeless breast.

"Who's been here?" he exclaimed, tearing from the gripe of the bloody blade the paper on which Captain Bullet had scratched his compliments. "So you've visited these parts, my foe?" he went on as he read the words. "You shot Pecos in cold blood, no doubt. I'll serve you the same trick one of these days."

The man entered the house, grating his teeth as he crossed the threshold. He walked straight to Bodine's private room as though it was a familiar locality to him.

"I'm back again!" he said, in a different tone from the one in which he had lately addressed the chief of the raiders. "Curse this disguise! I make up pretty well as Comanche Tom, but in my own house I must be Jack Bodine."

While he uttered the last sentences he busied himself with tearing off the heavy beard that covered his face, and all at once he cast it on the table before him. Then his true self was again revealed. It was Jack Bodine.

"I'm back again, and without the papers; that's what maddens me!" he went on, clinching his hands. "They're dearer to me than the girl—than Bessie, even. The loss of her couldn't hang anybody; their loss could. I've made a bargain; yes, I offered the girl to somebody in exchange for the documents, to a man whose voice I did not know, and whose face I could not see. He had me before his revolver; but I didn't care so much about that. *He knows the value of the papers!* Ay, there's the rub. Bessie Bodine, you're the best girl that ever breathed, and I'm the man that wouldn't lift a finger against you; but, my God! they've dragged me to the edge of a precipice, and then what will a man not do to save his own neck?"

Jack Bodine dropped into the chair before which he stood. His face did not possess a vestige of color, his eyes stared like a man's before which a ghost had risen, he shook like a reed. In short, the horse king of Silver Valley was completely unnerved.

What great crime revealed in the stolen papers could hold such a terrible sword over the ranchman's head? He had never quailed before the cocked revolvers of border desperadoes; but now, in his own house, he did not possess the nerve of a child.

All at once he started from the chair and grasped a revolver which he had transferred from his belt to the table.

Some one on the outside had certainly shouted his name.

As he moved toward the door he staggered a little, but grew steadier as he advanced. He was coming back to his former self.

He reached the threshold to be greeted by a voice already familiar.

"Hyar you ar', Jack?"

Bodine could scarcely believe his eyes.

Seated on a horse just beyond the porch was the man with whom he had made the infamous bargain. The ranchman was sure of it; the voice and the man's contour satisfied him.

"I'm back—that is, we meet ag'in, sooner than you expected, eh, Jack?" said the man—Texas—with a coarse laugh.

"You hev'n't furgot the trade?"

"I couldn't if I wanted to," was the response.

"You're still willin' to stan' by it?"

"Did you ever know Jack Bodine to lie?"

"Only once."

Bodine started.

"Who the deuce is that man, anyhow?" he asked himself, and then he said aloud. "When was that?"

"Never mind. You want the papers? I've got the girl."

"You've—got—Bessie? Oh, you—"

The ranchman paused. He had leaped over the dead man still on the porch, and with cocked revolver and flashing eyes was facing the man on horseback. For the moment he was thinking only of Bessie; the stolen papers and their importance had entirely escaped his mind.

"Don't tiger me, Jack," said Texas with a coolness that mollified Bodine's rage. "I don't scare worth a picayune! I'm hyar to keep my part ov the barg'in. Hyar is the papers."

As he finished something passed through the air between them, and fell at the ranch owner's feet.

Bodine stooped with a cry of joy, and picked it up. He held the precious papers in his hands once more!

Texas watched him with strange interest as he counted them over.

"All O. K., kurnel?" he asked.

"They're all here."

"Then good-by! Keep your word. I've kept mine. I'll treat the girl well. She shal hev a ranch tonier than this one by-and-by. Don't try to break the agreement. Be a man ov yer word, Jack."

The ranchman did not seem to hear; he stood in the shadows of the porch creepers like a man in a trance, and it was not until Texas was actually leaving that he realized that he had sold the Wild Rose of Silver Valley for a few compromising papers!

"No! no! I can't keep that trade!" he suddenly cried. "Bessie is Clara's child, and she would rise from her grave if I sold her daughter. Halt! man, or devil, whichever you are! I repudiate the bargain! Take these infernal papers and show them to the governor. Give me back the girl, and I'll give myself up to justice."

Texas heard these words, but never turned his head.

He was already beyond pistol-shot, and White Lighting had returned to the pastures from which Captain Bullet had filched him.

"Halt!" repeated Bodine in a louder tone. "I break my word! I lie for the second time. I can't sell Clara's child. By the gods of vengeance! I'll follow and kill you if you touch her."

Then Texas seemed to hear for the first time. He straightened himself in the stirrups and whirled upon Bodine.

"You are welcome to kill me, ef you kin!" he said. "I've bought the girl, an' I mean to keep 'er! The Wild Rose ov Silver Valley hyarafter blooms fur Texas!"

He sunk down into the saddle again, and the horse struck by his spurs dashed away.

"And I swear that I will carry out my threat!" cried Jack gazing after the victor. "So I'm welcome to kill you, eh? I'm going to do it!"

He re-entered the house, flung the papers upon the floor, and set his heel upon them as if he would grind them to powder.

While thus exhibiting his passion, a figure sprang across the porch and uttered a cry that made Bodine turn.

"Who are you?" demanded the ranchman springing forward, revolver in hand.

"My name is Little Topknot," was the answer. "Don't you want to find your daughter?"

The ranchman stopped and stepped back.

"Where is she, boy?"

"I'm going to help you find her after you have dressed my wound."

"So you're wounded?"

"Look for yourself."

The youth opened his jacket and displayed a shoulder covered with blood.

"It's lucky that it wasn't nearer my heart," he said smiling as Bodine gazed.

The ranch king of Silver Valley had dressed wounds before, and while he attended to the boy's needs the two chatted incessantly.

Suddenly Bodine paused in his work and turned pale.

"What's up?" asked Little Topknot, and then he added, "Oh, you've seen my tattoo. Do you recognize it?"

And Bodine answered in a voice not a whit like his natural tone:

"Recognize it? Of course I do. I knew your father. Love made us enemies."

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN BULLET MYSTIFIED.

It was not until Black Mustang and his party had retired from the raiders' camp on the Washita that Captain Bullet fully recovered his senses. His men were swearing all around him; they had raised the corpse of Sam from Shasta and carried it from beneath the horses' feet.

"Let 'em be. Dead men can't touch a trigger," suddenly cried the raider. "The boys that we leave behind will plant 'em decently. Wear 'em goin' now. Black Mustang kept us hyar long enough."

"We kin overtake the boy an' his gal pard!" ventured one fellow.

"Let 'em go fur the present. I'm goin' to find another man first."

The men stared at their captain.

"I mean Comanche Tom, the man who stole the boss animile ov the South-west from me," exclaimed Bullet.

The countenances of the raiders fell visibly; but without remonstrating they lifted the reins and waited for orders.

A moment later thirteen men were riding through the little grove from which Bodine alias Comanche Tom had taken White Lightning. The keen eyes of Captain Bullet soon

found the trail, and away the party went with their leader's eyes glistening with vengeance and anticipated triumph.

The sun came up and soared toward the zenith, but not a line was drawn. The trail still led them on.

"Whar is the thief taking us?" suddenly exclaimed Captain Bullet.

"To'ards Bodine's ranch, cap'n," was the reply.

On, still on across the waving grass of Silver Valley, until the buildings of the noted ranch rose before them.

"Mebbe Comanche Tom is Bodine's pard," murmured Bullet. "By Jehu! I'd like to find the two together. I'll finish the work begun in the Rio Dolores ef I do."

There was no voice to assure him that Tom Savage was dead, for the man who claimed to have killed him lay dead in the camp by the river.

"We'll make a detour hyar an' come upon the shanty through the timber," he said aloud, wheeling to the right.

To reach the belt of trees behind the rancho was but a minute's gallop, and the thirteen each with a cocked revolver in his right hand swooped down upon the home of Jack Bodine.

Dashing around the house they drew rein before the porch, and Captain Bullet called the name of his foe.

To the surprise of all there was a reply, and the next second the ranch-owner himself stepped into view.

"Jack himself an' without a revolver!" exclaimed half a dozen raiders.

"The fellar's crazy!"

Instantly thirteen weapons covered the fearless man; but he neither blanched or flinched.

"You wanted me, captain. I am here!" he said.

"Ov course you're thar; but I never saw you act the fool before," said the raider. "Whar ar' yer revolvers?"

"Where I left them—on my tables!"

"Do you 'pose I'm hyar to talk and not to kill?"

"That depends. And do you think that while I'm here there's no rifle covering your heart?"

Captain Bullet started and looked at the house.

"Two can play at the killing game," Bodine went on. "Your heart is just now covered by a rifle that never fails to kill."

"Whar is it?"

"Shoot me and see."

The chief of the Red Hoods bit his lips.

He knew the mettle that had made Bodine one of the notorious characters of the border; but he kept up his insolent bravado.

"You lie, Jack!" he said. "Comanche Tom, yer pard, could kill but one."

"And that one would be Captain Bullet."

A coarse laugh was the raider's reply. His arm shot forward as it still rung out on the air.

"I'll risk it anyhow!" he grated.

Death was in his eye and a finger that had killed before was at the trigger; but before he could press it a window above the porch suddenly opened, and the click of a rifle-lock was distinctly heard.

Bodine sprang back with a cry of disappointment, and at the raised window the raiders saw the figure of the boy who had shot Sam from Shasta!

He stood in full view irresolute, for the bullet intended for Captain Bullet's heart still remained in his gun.

"Down! charge!" thundered Captain Bullet. "Take him alive."

Instantly thirteen saddles were emptied, and like tigers the Red Hoods sprang forward.

Led by their captain, they cleared the porch at a single bound and dashed into the house.

The charge was so sudden that Bodine had hardly reached his room before the bandits of the South-west were upon him. The failure of the boy's attempt on Bullet's life had unhinged him for the time. He reached his strong room, however, and darted at the revolvers on the table; but ere he could turn to meet his foes, he was hurled back and almost instantly overpowered!

"The boy now!" thundred Captain Bullet.

"Does it take twelve Hoods to hold one man?"

A dash was made for the stairway, and as the rough raiders mounted the steps, crack! crack! went the chambers of a revolver, and two burly forms pitched downward upon those below.

"The boy is making up fur his failure on you, captain," said Bodine to the raider king. "One

man can defend himself against forty men where the boy stands."

Hard upon the ranchman's words the death-dealing weapon spoke again.

"If you don't want your men shot down without mercy call them off," was Bodine's advice. "The youngster is shooting through a hole in an iron door!"

"The deuce he is!" cried Captain Bullet, springing away.

He reached the foot of the stair, where four dead men already lay trampled under foot by their companions. The top of the stair was hidden by smoke.

"You can't take the young wolf by chargin' 'im hyar!" he cried, throwing himself before the maddened men about to charge the iron door the third time. "Go out an' surround the shanty."

He hurled them back by brute strength, and saw them rush from the room.

"Your men are too late, captain," said Bodine, as the raider rejoined him. "The boy is gone!"

"Not yet," was the response.

"Count your horses and see."

Captain Bullet sprung from the house, but a moment later he came back swearing like a dragoon.

There were but twelve steeds before the porch, and several adventuresome desperadoes who had scaled the roof were saying from the windows above that the room with the iron door was empty!

The ranch-owner's eyes glittered with ferocious triumph as he listened to the report.

"Well, we've got you, Jack!" suddenly cried Captain Bullet. "Do you want to face the two governors?"

"I'm not afraid to face a dozen."

"The ten thousand dollars reward offer is still good."

"You've got it in your hands."

"But I don't want it. I wouldn't touch a picayune of it. I don't hunt my enemies to turn 'em over to a jury of twelve fools. I hunt 'em for myself!"

These words recurred more than once to Jack Bodine as he rode from his rancho in the midst of the ten fierce-looking men, whose revolvers were almost at his very head.

He had fallen into the clutches of a man who had been his enemy for fifteen years, and, as the sun sunk lower and touched the rim of the horizon, he seemed to be busy with his thoughts.

Constantly watched, although he knew it not, by Captain Bullet, he rode through the lovely valley where the second happy period of his life had been passed—that through which Bessie had cheered him.

The cavalcade suddenly halted.

They were in the center of a little grove above whose loftiest trees towered the hills of the South-west. At a sign from Captain Bullet the raiders dismounted, and for the first time Bodine saw that several spades had been carried from the rancho.

He seemed to understand what they signified. His grave was to be dug!

Nor was he wrong, for at Bullet's command a grave was made in the center of the valley, and he was led to the edge of it, and stood with his face toward its depths.

"Are you ready, Jack?" asked Captain Bullet, as he stepped back a few steps and lifted a revolver. "I'm goin' to bore yer heart fur the simple reason that Clara thought a good deal of yer face. I'm goin' to give you a grave because you giv her one when she died. Now, ar' you ready?"

A sudden ray of hope lit up Bodine's eyes.

"I am ready!" he said, as if he wanted the death shot to come.

The next moment the clear tones of Captain Bullet's revolver awoke the echoes of the secluded spot, and the figure of the ranchman of Silver Valley reeled for a moment at the edge of the open grave, and then disappeared among its depths!

"He made that grave years ago!" said the killer, as he turned away. "He might hev known that the vengeance of Capt'n Bullet would overtake 'im."

Five minutes later the raiders rode away, leaving Bodine in his unfilled grave, for not a particle of earth had been thrown upon him.

"How did I come to furtit that?" exclaimed the chief raider, mechanically reining in his horse. "He war jes' the kind o' man to carry a pictur' of a lock of ha'r nigh his heart. I'll go back an' see anyhow."

He left his men and rode back. Myriads of stars were shining over the valley when he re-entered it, and alighting from his horse, he ap-

proached the grave. His men had made it shallow.

Lying down, he plunged his hand into the damp depths, but it touched nothing.

"Thunders! what hez happened?" he exclaimed, starting back.

Once more he returned to his work; but with the same result, and at last, with an audible oath, he leaped into the gaping hole.

It did not take him a moment to inspect the entire place, and with a cry of mingled horror and rage, he quickly deserted it.

The grave was empty!

"I wonder who stole the body?" he exclaimed looking wildly around.

"I killed him! I know I did, fur I never miss a man at fifteen paces; an' when I touched the trigger I hed a bead on his heart."

It was a mystery that gave Captain Bullet the look of a thoroughly frightened desperado.

CHAPTER X.

THE AMPUTATED HAND.

THE capture and shooting of Jack Bodine, the ranchman of Silver Valley, had resulted from Little Topknot's failure to kill Captain Bullet from the window of the rancho; this the reader well knows.

"If, by any fatal circumstance, you should fail," said Bodine to the youth previous to sending him up-stairs to cover the raider chief while he talked to him, "you will escape at the first opportunity, for, since I know you, I would not have you fall the second time into Captain Bullet's hands for the world. Leave the house and take White Lightning; yes, take my best horse, for you may need him."

The boy had obeyed these orders.

After a brief but bloody defense of the iron door—an event just witnessed—he left the house by crossing the roof of the porch and dropping to the ground among the raiders' horses. Throwing himself into the nearest saddle before his escape could be discovered, he rode away toward the pasture to which the white horse had returned.

"I'll take Jack at his word," he exclaimed, spying the steed; "Captain Bullet will make short work of the lord of Silver Valley, and if I don't take White Lightning away for Bessie, he'll fall back into that scoundrel's clutches."

White Lightning was easily caught, and Little Topknot was soon flying over the ground toward the mountain passes, and the rapid rivers of the North.

Jack Bodine he would never see again, and he would not know why the ranchman started and turned pale at sight of his tattoo. Brief had been their acquaintance, terrible their separation.

"I've got a task, anyway," said the boy, as he rode along; "and that is to find and protect Bessie. The man that put the bullet into my shoulder must have overtaken the girl, for she never reached the ranch. I want to finish the career of that monster who left me on the mountain for the eagles and the kites. Too many irons in the fire, Topknot. You must take some out or they will burn. You can't hunt Bessie and Captain Bullet at the same time; that's certain. You must toss for it."

He reined in his horse and drew a gold coin from his pocket. Tossing it into the air, he said, "Tails for Captain Bullet; heads for the girl," and watched the piece descend. As it struck the ground at his horse's feet he leaned over to ascertain the result of the throw.

"Heads it is! the girl first!" he exclaimed, and darting at the coin he picked it up, and transferred it to his pocket. "I wouldn't have turned my hand for the difference," he continued. "Such a girl as Bessie Bodine's got a lover somewhere, and even if I help her out of this scrape, at the risk of my life, there'll be no chance for me. Somebody would step between us and say: 'Here, you young Comanche; you've got no business to think anything of this gal. What are you around here for anyhow? Git!' and the girl would let me go. But I've tossed fairly and she wins. I'm going to find her, whether she thanks me or not."

Thus Little Topknot made a decision which was destined eventually to change the whole course of his life.

He kept straight on toward the raider's camp on the Washita. Did he expect to find Bessie there?

He entered the country of the hills as the sun went down. Silver Valley was behind him.

"Halt, stranger!" came suddenly from the shadows of the first pass into which he rode.

The young hunter drew rein and cocked his revolver.

"That's a fine horse you're on," continued the

same voice. "Hev ye any objections to tradin'?"

Little Topknot did not answer, his eyes were busily looking for the speaker. At the first glimpse of him the boy intended to give him a bullet.

"Giv' me an answer, er by hokey! I'll hev to swap horses with a stiff! Ar' you lookin' fur my anatomy? No use, youngster; I've got the dead drop on you."

"Who are you?"

"I'll answer thet. I'm Comanche Tom, late of the Red Hills."

"That's a downright lie!" retorted the boy. "Tom Savage is dead, and I've killed the man that wiped him out."

"Then I'm somebody else," was the response, accompanied by a coarse laugh which made the boy start as though it had betrayed the man in the shadows. "I can't be a corpse and talk. Do you mean that you hev actually killed Tom's slayer?"

"I do."

"Then wear pard!"

"I want no partner; I'm doing business on my own hook."

"Wal, I wish you good-luck, but I'm willin' to jine hands with the chap what avenged Tom Savage. You kin go on, now."

Certain noises told Little Topknot that the pass ahead was clear; the man had pulled his horse to one side.

"I'll go on," our hero said.

"All right, turn to the left at the end of the gulch."

"I'm my own master"

The boy was riding slowly forward as he uttered the last words.

"See hyar!" exclaimed the unseen, and out from the shadows darted a hand that closed on Little Topknot's bridle-rein. "Life lies to the left; death to the right! You avenged Tom Savage, eh? That's what I like you fur. Tom war a brick."

The boy was gazing into the great, hairy face that rose above the Atlantean shoulders of the speaker. "To the right, I say, boy—to the right is death, and don't you furtit it!"

"Who is there?"

"Death himself! Isn't thet enough?"

"I'm not afraid."

The man ground his teeth till they seemed to crack.

"I don't often hev to save a life ag'in' the owner's will," he said, "but I'm goin' to do you a favor whether you appreciate it or not. Don't object; act decently."

The white boy of the Comanches could not realize his real situation until he found himself being led down the pass by the stalwart man in the other saddle. A great bronze hand kept an iron gripe on his rein, and from amid the hair that covered the unknown's face, a pair of glittering eyes looked out.

Little Topknot was too amazed to speak, and not a word was said until the couple had reached a certain spot a few rods beyond the pass.

"Now you kin proceed," said the bearded rough. "I've saved yer life an' only because you killed the man what shot Comanche Tom, the best horse-thief south of the Arkansaw."

The hand had already left the rein, and the stalwart preserver had straightened in the saddle.

"One word," said the boy, eagerly. "Who are you?"

"No! You caught me in one lie about my name, to-night. I won't try to tell the truth."

"Suit yourself," was the response. "Good-by."

The hand of bronze waved an adieu as the girl-hunter turned away.

"Another enigma!" muttered Little Topknot. "This country is full of them; and every one, somehow or other, is connected with Tom Savage, the king of horse-thieves in the South-west—but the man who snatched me from the wolves of the air. When I shot Sam from Shasta I did every one of Comanche Tom's pards a favor. Hello! I'm followed."

The boy stopped and turned his head; the rapid gallop of a horse was heard. It seemed to be coming straight toward him. He took out his revolvers and waited.

"There's likely to be a corpse in that saddle," he said, quietly, as the horse came on. "I've been stopped once to night; no living mortal shall stop me again!"

He was in a little valley beautifully revealed by the moonlight, and into it the strange horse sprung almost suddenly from the shadows that lay toward the pass.

The saddle was already empty!

"Ah! I am not to be stopped, but I will stop!"

said Little Topknot, and, rising in his stirrups, he waited for the horse.

The animal had slackened its gait as if its fear was passing away, and, when it espied the handsome white horse ridden by the boy, it came forward with a neigh.

Little Topknot seized the bridle and stopped the steed, but the next moment he uttered a cry of horror and dropped the leathern rein.

A dead hand was clinging to the bridle, and from the hideous stump blood was still oozing!

If it had been the hard hand of the mountain desperado, Little Topknot would not have turned white; but, on the contrary, it was a woman's hand, white, delicate and shapely!

The boy gazed at the horrible object several moments before he ventured to touch it. Then he tried to loosen its gripe, but in vain; it clung to the rein with the tenacity of death itself.

"It is Bessie Bodine's hand! I would know it among a thousand, although I haven't seen it a dozen times," he exclaimed. "I did not dream that she was so near, and in peril. The man who stopped me in the pass knew all about her. He wanted to keep me from finding her; he succeeded. I let him lead me where he pleased, like a fool. I'll find him now and pay him back, and I'll take with me the hand of Bessie Bodine, which I will hurl into his face."

As he finished, the boy cut the rein and secured the dead hand. Then he struck the strange horse with his spurs and sent him on.

"Curse the devils that cut off Bessie's hand! I'll have more than one life for that devilish deed! I'll shoot them down without mercy!"

He was riding back now. When he reached the mouth of the pass, he did not stop, but kept on.

All at once an outburst of laughter assailed his ears and made his eyes flash.

"I'm nearing them!" he hissed. "I will show them that a girl's hand, even in these parts, cannot be cut off with impunity."

The laughter betrayed the presence of some kind of a camp to the boy, and a few minutes later he came upon it almost abruptly. In the light of a fire burning on the ground sat ten or twelve as rough-looking fellows as ever shot and stole in the South-west. The blaze revealed their stalwart figures and showed the boy the greasy cards they were manipulating. They were resting in fancied security, for not a guard protected the camp.

Little Topknot rode forward through the mountain grass, that was as a velvet carpet to his horse's feet.

When he stopped he leaned toward the fire and thrust forward his revolvers.

"Hello, demons!" he cried.

Instantly a dozen heads were lifted, and an instant later as many men sprung up and stared at him.

"Draw and die!" came over the boy's lips. "Where is the girl whose hand you cut off awhile ago? Where is Bessie Bodine? Don't stand like statues before me. Talk!"

The desperate-looking fellows seemed surprised.

"Answer me, or by Heaven! I'll begin to kill! I'm here for vengeance, and I'll have it. Where's the girl you've mutilated?"

"We hev'n't seen a girl since we left the Injun camp on Cavalry creek," was the response.

"You lie!"

"You kin say that, stranger, when you've got the dead drop on the Crested Jayhawks ov Texas, but jes' giv' us a show, an' repeat them words, ef you dare!"

Little Topknot's look changed.

"These men are innocent. I've roused the wrong camp and made new enemies. The Crested Jayhawks, eh? To me they look more like human tigers."

Then he addressed the men.

"I'll take you at your word," he said; "but I'll find the amputator of Bessie Bodine's hand!"

"Keep out ov our way. You've insulted the Jayhawks by calling 'em liars. You've got to apologize."

The boy, who had lowered his revolvers, quickly raised them again as the Jayhawks strode forward.

"Stand back!" he cried.

"Apologize!"

The boy's eyes flashed.

"A Comanche never takes anything back!" he said. "I'll be avenging somebody if I fire on you. You'll shoot me when I turn my back on you."

"We may!" was the menace.

"Then I'll open the ball."

Little Topknot lowered his weapons just an inch, and the next instant he was sending death

from both revolvers straight into the ranks of the Jayhawks.

The border ruffians recoiled from that steady fire which seemed to kill at every second, and before the death-freighted chambers could be emptied they fled pell-mell into the shadows leaving the boy chief of the Comanches in possession of the field.

"We've got to leave our battle-ground!" he said addressing his horse. "Like cowards that they are, the Jayhawks will shoot from the dark."

He turned White Lightning's head, and throwing his body under the strong arched neck, after the manner of the Indian rider, dashed away like a thunderbolt.

The movement had not been executed a moment too soon, for the Jayhawks opened on him with their revolvers; but he escaped untouched perhaps to fall before them at another time.

CHAPTER X.

A FIRE FIEND.

THE white Comanche did not select any particular road to safety but gave the equine king of Silver Valley both rein and spurs and trusted all to him. The horse carried him away at breakneck speed, and the boy was satisfied. He had too much to think about to watch the course of the horse.

Miles from the camp of the Jayhawks, White Lightning stopped of his own accord, not exactly to blow but to raise his head and snuff the air.

This action roused the boy.

"Somebody coming, eh?" he ejaculated as he sent a look of defiance over his shoulder. "Maybe the Jayhawks have turned hunters. I hope they have. I am quite ready to meet them!" and he clutched the butts of the two revolvers, loaded once more and ready for the fray.

But the border bandits were not on his trail. He was being approached from the front, but by whom? The horse had already told him that some one was coming.

Behind him were the hills from whose fastnesses he had just ridden for his life; around him grew the tall grass of the south-western valleys. It touched his stirrups, green, soft and beautiful.

"Down!" he said to the horse. "You have been Jack Bodine's property long enough to know that this grass can hide you."

The command was not a new one for the white steed, for he knelt and then lay on the ground with his eyes blazing, and his ears set to catch every sound.

Little Topknot stooped beside him with his fingers at the triggers.

For some time horse and boy listened with all their might; but heard nothing save the wind among the tall grass. Still they did not move. White Lightning began to look disappointed; his intelligent eyes told the boy this.

"Never mind, I'll trust you," Little Topknot said. "You heard something coming, a stray buffalo, perhaps; but something nevertheless."

Before the sound of his last word had died away our hero started. A horse was galloping through the grass; the sound which he had heard a thousand times while with the Comanches could not be mistaken.

Nearer and nearer came the horse.

Little Topknot ventured to peep through the top blades, and he saw what he expected to see, a man on horseback and alone, but whether red or white he could not distinctly make out.

"He'll sit for his portrait presently," he murmured as he gazed. "If he comes straight on he will pass within twenty feet of me."

As if to oblige the boy the man kept straight ahead; but all at once he reined in his steed forty feet away.

"Who'd want 'im?" the boy Comanche heard him exclaim in a tone that made him start. "Who'd drag a karkiss from a grave? That's what I'd like to know. Mebbe, arter all, I only winged 'im. He might hev hed life enough left to crawl out an' drag himself toward the hills. He may be somewhar in the grass waitin' fur strength to creep on. By Jehu! ef I thought so, I'd fire the valley. The grass is green an' soft I know; but it'll burn jes' the same. They burned me out of Blacksnake Valley arter the Rio Dolores affair with jes' such grass ez this. I hed to ride fur my life an' my hoss lost half his tail by the fire! Whew! that war yer closest shave, Cap'n Bullet."

"Captain Bullet! my enemy!" fell from the boy's lips. "Who does he want to burn out? Ah! I'd like to know before I proceed to let him know that I am nearer than he thinks."

"Let me see. Which way ar' the wind? To'ard the grave I hed dug fur him! I'll light up the valley jes' fur the fun ov the thing."

"Not while I can prevent!" grated Little Topknot. "The wind is blowing against my face. If you fired the grass, villain, escape for me becomes almost impossible."

This was true. The Comanche boy knew the deceptive nature of the grass that surrounded him just as well as Captain Bullet did. Although green and soft, good food for stock, it would at any time burn like powder, and especially when the fire was fed by a strong wind.

Captain Bullet laughed when he leaned over the grass. He was going to burn out a wounded enemy; no; he intended to burn him up.

Little Topknot sprung erect when he saw the raider bend over to fire the blades. He even started forward, but a sudden thought made him stop. He was deserting his horse and unless he slew Captain Bullet before the fatal match was struck escape without the horse was not to be thought of.

He went back and at his command White Lightning left the ground. The boy gained the saddle as the steed established his footing.

"Now I have you!" he cried, looking toward the incendiary. "With your last match in your hands, Captain Bullet, I'll avenge the murder of Colonel Santa Fe."

As the boy's pistol went up a spark of fire leaped over the top of the grass forty feet away, then another and another until he saw a blaze! At the same time Captain Bullet's horse sprung away carrying with him a man who kept his body bent toward the ground as if he was carrying a torch through the grass.

The villain was doing nothing more nor less!

"The old trick! I've been a fool!" exclaimed Little Topknot, who seemed rooted to the spot by the terrible discovery he had made. "He learned from the Comanches how to make a grass torch in a second, and how to fire a valley with it while he rides at breakneck speed! But I'll catch him yet. I've got the best horse, and I'll spatter his brains along the edge of his last fire!"

The torch which Captain Bullet now and then waved over his head to give it new life showed him to the young avenger, and burning to reach the desperado he urged his horse away.

The blades were too pliable to obstruct a horse, and, with the wind blowing athwart his face, the boy rode for the chief of the Red Hoods.

Already a line of fire was eating up the grass at his left hand, and the roar of the fiery sea was assailing his ears.

Captain Bullet had obtained a start that was greatly in his favor, and Little Topknot was compelled to ride parallel to the blaze, for it had established a scarlet wall through which no horse could break.

Hissing and roaring like a thousand demons, the fire swept onward; but the boy saw only the figure flying on beyond the blaze. Once or twice White Lightning flinched, for, with wild eyes and distended nostrils, he was trying to help his master on to vengeance, although he felt the attempt a futile one.

"I must stop! the fire will master me!" suddenly cried the boy. "Captain Bullet escapes me for the present, but not for long!"

White Lightning was not loth to stop; the horse knew the awful peril that now menaced them.

The boy looked at Captain Bullet no longer; he saw but the mad sea of fire almost at his side; he felt the heat of the blaze on his cheek.

The valley was doomed to destruction, and with it the wounded enemy, to destroy whom the raider had fired the grass.

"You can outrun the fire, White Lightning!" cried Little Topknot, patting the horse's heated neck. "Now let us beat the rascal's flames!"

No spurs were needed to urge the white steed on; he flew from the fire like a rocket; but, at the same time, the flames seemed to gain new impetus.

"Aha! we're going to escape to avenge!" Little Topknot said more than once. "We'll find Bessie dead or alive, and pay with bloody interest the hand-stealers."

Suddenly the boy stopped; there were fires on his right, and the valley was blazing in front of him. Little bunches of blazing grass carried before the wind, had ignited the prairie in a thousand places!

White Lightning turned his head and looked inquiringly into his young rider's face.

"We must go back and run the gantlet!" said the boy shutting his teeth hard behind the sentence. "If we go on we will become hemmed in. Back we must ride, to do or to die!"

It was a terrible resolve, but the only manly one under the circumstances.

Little Topknot turned the white horse toward the original fire. Then he bound his cap over the animal's mouth to keep the fire breath from his lungs.

"Ready!" he shouted. "Now for life—or death!"

Away plunged the horse headed straight for the fire. He did not swerve an inch. The next moment, as it seemed, a dark mass was swallowed up by the roaring sea of flame; but a second later it fell from the torment to sink upon the hot ashes and an object that had a human shape disengaged itself from the mass and dropped with a groan in the wake of the fire.

Captain Bullet, seated on his horse far away, was drinking in with boisterous glee, the destruction of the lovely valley.

He would have laughed louder if he could have witnessed the result of Little Topknot's gallant attempt to pierce the fiery barrier and live!

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT THE FIRE DID.

THE fire kindled by the hand of the raider chief, continued to sweep across the little valley. Driven southward by a brisk wind from the distant hills, it seemed to gain momentum and destruction as it proceeded. Hundreds of animals, roused from their grassy coverts, were flying, fear-stricken, from the oncoming sea of fire, which devoured everything as it advanced.

Captain Bullet had halted on the summit of a rise, so that the grand sight was below him. His eyes blazed with revenge, for he felt that Jack Bodine had now surely perished.

"I leave my mark behind to-night!" he exclaimed, gathering up the lines. "I'm partial to fires like this, as more than one man knows. Now let anybody say that I hev'n't finished the prince ov Silver Valley, jes' let 'im remark in my presence that Jack Bodine is alive! He's down yonder somewhar, black ez the grass, an' he died, too, cussin' the man what killed Santa Fe."

The fire had ceased to roar for the raider; it was far away, burning still, but gradually getting out of fuel.

He turned his horse's head toward the camp on the Washita, but before he could start, a loud hallo came to his ears.

Captain Bullet turned and looked toward the fire.

"One ov my Hoods!" he exclaimed, seeing the object between him and the sheet of flame. "What ef I've wiped out my men? What—Nol they warn't in this valley when I struck the match!"

He watched the approaching horseman with strange interest; it made him hold his breath; but when the man drew rein before him, Captain Bullet reeled away with a cry of horror.

That man had passed through a furnace; so had his steed. The beard of the former had been burned away, his face was black and blistered, and his garments held the smell of fire.

"The cap'n!" ejaculated this hideous apparition of man. "Why, you hev'n't been touched! By Jehu! you must have been behind the fire, while we war right afore it."

"Before it? Where ar' the rest ov my men?"

"Back yonder, all in a heap, cap'n. We stopped to wait fur you; you went back to the grave fur suthin' you know; an' so we dismounted fur a game to while away the time. We never thought once ov fire, an' we didn't see it till our hosses begun to snort and act like mad critters. Even then we said we war in no danger, fur the wind war in our favor; but it turned quicker nor you could snap yer fingers, cap'n, an' came down on us faster nor an express train with the throttle-valve wide open. We never stopped to rake in the last pot, you bet, but skipped fur the hosses, kickin' an' plugin' like lunatics. Jes' afore we reached 'em they got loose, an' by the spurs ov Absalom! cap'n, off they went—all 'ceptin' Pecos, hyar, the best hoss in the gang."

Captain Bullet grated his teeth.

"Thar we war, the fire comin' down upon us, an' with only one hoss fur ten men! What did we do? We skipped, but thar never lived the man that kin out run a fire like thet. I kept even with the boys although I hed a hoss. Cap'n, the fire overtook us; the boys turned an' cussed it to the last an' I left 'em when I saw the last one fall down on the ashes. I ain't ez handsome ez I war yesterday; an' I am hyar through a miracle. I'm goin' to live fur one object: to hunt down an' kill the man what fired the grass!"

The raider chief did not flinch, but eyed the man steadily as he replied:

"Hunt 'im down, Dick, an' make 'im pass in his checks; thet's what I advise you to do."

"Cap'n, I don't care who he is, not even ef the devil ar' yerself. Ef you could see the boys lyin' whar I left 'em, black ez Diggers, you'd hunt fur the heart ov the man thet fired the prairy."

"I don't want to see 'em, Dick. You ar' the last ov the Red Hoods. Go an' hunt the slayer ov yer pards an' give him the contents ov yer revolver."

"Nol not thet, cap'n. He shel perish ez the boys did!"

Bullet's eyes flashed, and for a moment he appeared about to spring at the throat of the man before him; but he curbed his desire.

"I'm goin' to the camp," he said.

"An' I intend to begin my hunt fur the man I want."

"Success to you, Dick."

The couple separated there, and Captain Bullet broke into a laugh when his horse had carried him beyond earshot of the fire-scarred man.

"The scorched fool never suspected!" he exclaimed. "He didn't dream that the man he wants war right before 'im. I know Big Horn Dick pretty well. He will never suspect me; an' thet's why I didn't kill 'im back thar an' put an end to his vengeance hunt afore he hed a good start. So I'm cap'n ov the Red Hoods no longer. I wiped 'em out myself at one swoop an' done myself a sarvice, too. Once more I'm free! I kin go whar I please now, an' what I win I won't hev to divide. I kin hunt the boy an' the white horse without hevin' ten suspicious growlers at my heels. By Jove! cap'n, thet war the best match you ever struck!"

Away from the fire and into the night rode the chief of the desperadoes. Behind him at a slower gait moved the fire-scorched horse that bore toward the last resting-place of the Red Hoods the survivor of the band.

Big Horn Dick, as he was called, did not mutter or laugh as he rode over the ashes. Perhaps he was going back to bury his comrades.

All at once his horse shied and retreated from some object on the ground.

Dick urged the animal on again and leaned forward to examine the cause of fright.

"A hoss an' hyar!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know thet any ov our animiles made fur the fire. Why the critter is alive, an'—"

"I, too, am living, thank heaven!" interrupted a voice, and a human figure rose at the horse's side. "The hand of Captain Bullet has failed to rid the world of me. I am living to pay him for the past. Who are you?"

Big Horn Dick could not find his tongue for a minute. He could only stare at the person who had advanced to his horse's head, and who stood there with a revolver in his right hand.

"Who are you? I am Little Topknot, spared by Captain Bullet's last fire for revenge. Out with your handle, or I will leave you with my horse."

"Don't touch the trigger fur a bullet in the head onfits a man fur bizness," said Dick. "I'm the last ov the twelve pards, who yesterday war bloomin' like roses. I'm Dick Jasper from the Big Horn kentry, er, in other words, Big Horn Dick. What war thet you said about Cap'n Bullet?"

"I say that he fired the grass thet withered his hated band."

"Cap'n Bullet?" echoed Dick, as he fairly gasped to think that a few moments since he might have taken vengeance for his pards. "Do you know thet fur sartin, Topknot?"

"I saw him strike the match," was the answer. "But he didn't expect to burn you, nor me. He was after somebody who has escaped from a grave somewhere."

"Jack Bodiné!"

It was the boy's turn to start.

"Tell me about that!" he said looking up into Dick's face.

"Not now, not hyar. We kin be pards in the vengeance bizness. I'm perfectly willin' to jine bands with you. What do you say?"

Little Topknot did not hesitate, but put up his hand which was met half-way by the blackened, and blistered hand of the outlaw from the Big Horn.

"Pards in the killin' bizness!" exclaimed Dick with pride as he pressed the boy's hand. "We'll never shake one another, nor run from a foe. Get yer hoss on his feet."

Little Topknot heaved a sigh.

"My horse has just died. His last act was

to carry me through the fire. Captain Bullet has stolen him for the last time!"

"Why, 'tis White Lightnin'!" cried Big Horn Dick who had leaped to the ground. "Do you know, boy, thet hyar lies the hoss what war the innocent cause ov the death ov my pards?"

"I believe you, but you must explain."

"I will, but not hyar as I said. We ar' pards—pards! Hello! what's this?"

Big Horn Dick had picked up something white which had lain at the edge of the saddle-skirts.

"Oh, that? Give that to me!" cried Little Topknot springing at the find, at which the Red Hood was staring with distended eyes. "You must not touch it."

"War it yourn? No, you've got two hands," said Dick. "It b'longed to a woman. Whar did you git it?"

"Up there among the hills. It is Bessie Bodine's hand."

"Bessie Bodine's, eh? Thet's whose you think is it?" and Little Topknot saw Dick Jasper smile.

"What do you know about it?" cried the boy. "You know something and you must tell me, or here and now our partnership ends forever! If that is not Bessie Bodine's hand say so, and tell me whose it is or over your saddle, Big Horn Dick, I'll scatter the brains that the fire has spared."

The mysterious hand slipped from the Red Hood's grasp, and he looked into the revolver which Little Topknot had thrust into his face.

"Whose hand is it? Quick!" grated the boy. "Thet's what I'd like to know myself. But it isn't Bessie Bodine's. I know that."

"Tell me how you know it."

There was no answer.

"You will not tell me?"

Dick's eyes not his lips said, "I will not—not just now at any rate."

The boy lowered his revolver. "I don't want to kill you. I can't do it under the circumstances," he said to the Red Hood. "But will you swear to me that this is not Bessie Bodine's hand?"

"Ov course I will, pard," was the reply, "an' ef you'll mount behind me I'll undertake to show you whose hand it war."

The young avenger started toward the horse.

"Let us be off at once," he cried eagerly.

"I want to satisfy myself that Bessie Bodine has not been mutilated."

The place of this strange meeting was soon deserted by all except the carcass of the equine king of Silver Valley. White Lightning, the coveted racer, had saved his last master.

Seated behind Big Horn Dick, the boy Comanche had time to reflect on the sudden change in his fortunes.

"He's going toward the hills where I first found the hand," he suddenly exclaimed unconsciously speaking aloud.

"You found it among the hills, eh?" said Dick. "The horse carried it thar, I s'pose. Wal hyar we ar'. Now I'll unravel the mystery."

The horse had stopped, and Dick was already on the ground.

The fire had not molested the spot they had reached. It was near the foot of the hills.

"Ef the fire hed reached hyar, I couldn't show you what I want to," continued the Red Hood. "I kivered her up with grass, fur I couldn't bury 'er, poor thing."

Little Topknot had already leaped to the heap of grass which Big Horn Dick was tearing down. He held his breath.

"Hyar she is!" suddenly cried the Red Hood.

"Is that Bessie's face?"

The boy who had leaned forward sprung back with a cry of horror which was taken up by his new companion.

"Double thunders!" exclaimed Dick. "What kind ov an infernal kentry is this? Two hours ago I buried a white gal hyar, in the grass, an' now I find in the grave the karkiss ov a Comanche!"

It was true. Instead of gazing into a white face in the moonlight, the two partners were staring at the painted features of a Comanche brave!

CHAPTER XII.

A BORDER RUFFIAN'S WOOING.

BIG HORN DICK was right; the severed hand so startlingly thrown into Little Topknot's possession among the hills, was not Bessie's. But whose was it? There was the mystery.

The reader will readily recall the man who halted the boy avenger in the gulch, the personage who led him half unwilling to the left and away from the camp of the Jayhawks into which he might unsuspectingly have ridden.

To that man, one of our characters, too long neglected, perhaps, we now return.

He disappeared from the boy's sight immediately after relinquishing the rein he had held for some minutes, and Little Topknot rode away to stop the unguided horse, and to find the dead hand which he believed to be Bessie Bodine's.

The strange man rode off in a contrary direction, and passed close by the camp-fire of the Jayhawks at whose burly figures, as they handled the cards, he shot a quick and contemptuous glance.

"It wouldn't hev been good fur the youngster's hide ef I had let him proceed," he said under his breath. "Them mountain wolves would hev made short work ov 'im. I hed 'im at the end ov my revolver, but I couldn't drop 'im, fur I want 'im to live an' get even with Cap'n Bullet fur the sake ov the past. I told 'im I war Comanche Tom, but I missed it thar, fur he saw Tom dead in the Red Hills kentry, an' he killed the man what did thet job. Then Sam from Shasta ar' dead. The boy may trip me up some day, but I didn't feel like killin' 'im back thar although I may hev to do it yet."

Half an hour later the man dismounted before a huge rock that seemed to have been rolled against the mouth of a cave in the hillside.

Putting his shoulder against the stone he moved it to one side, and revealed an aperture large enough to admit a man's body.

"I'm back again to my valley rose," he ejaculated, as he crept in. "I hev'n't been gone a great while, but I've hed several adventures jes' the same, an' I've seen somebody in whom I fancy she may be interested. Now, play yer cards well, Texas, you've got the trumps in yer fist."

Texas—for the speaker was that redoubtable individual—soon left the dark corridor of the hillside cave, and entered a chamber in which a fire was burning.

A light exclamation of astonishment made him stop, but the next moment he stepped forward.

"Warn't lookin' fur me jes' yet, eh?" he exclaimed, smiling at the cold welcome that the beautiful occupant of the cave was bestowing. "I'm like counterfeit eagles, I allus come home."

"And like curses, too!" said the girl sharply. "Shall I tell you again that you can never succeed with your plot? That—"

"You've told me so often, Bessie, my valley rose, that I kin repeat yer language," was his interruption. "You belong to Texas! Now, let me tell you how I came to get you."

The girl fixed her fair eyes upon the man with a strange curiosity but did not speak.

"In the first place I bought you!" he began; "an' secondly, you are here with Jack Bodine's consent."

"What! here with father's knowledge? Never! You are lying to me now."

Beneath the rough mustache Texas smiled.

"Your father has been a fool fur many years!" he went on. "Let me strike you gently with a question! Suppose a man hed been the leader ov a band ov cut-throats, reg'lar white Comanches, an' thet one day he, with his own hand, should carry off the child ov the Governor ov New Mexico—a little gal jes' big enough to prattle—that a heavy reward should be offered fur the cut-throat's cap'n, dead er alive! The man escapes; he hides fur years; he comes back with a bonanza fur his bank; and he sets up not a million miles from his old stampin' ground. Now would thet man ef he war anyways sharp keep some papers that would give him dead away—papers that would prove thet he war thet child-stealer? Wouldn't you call 'im a fool, Bessie Bodine?"

The girl could not speak. Her gaze had become a wild, half maniacal stare; her tongue seemed glued to the roof of her mouth.

"I call 'im a fool, an' ef I took advantage ov what I knowed, because I wanted the purtiest wife in the hull South-west, I'm not to blame, am I? I found them papers, an' I merely said to thet man: 'The dockments fur the girl! Is it a trade?' and he said, 'Yes.' He didn't like to say it. I fairly tore it from 'im, but the bargain is jes' ez bindin'. It war a fair trade, Bessie. He's got his papers, and Texas owns the beauty of the valley."

"I see! I see!" broke from the girl's lips, as she staggered forward. "That man is my—"

She paused. A new revelation, and a terrible one, seemed to burst upon her.

"Tell me all the truth, now that you have told me so much," she cried, in an imperative tone. "I am not Jack Bodine's child, after all, but I am the one you say he stole from the Governor of New Mexico. Is this not true?"

"You're wrong," Texas said. "As true as

the sky is above us, you are Jack's own child; but the governor's daughter isn't dead. They say that she is somewhere in these parts, a reg'lar border queen, ez wild ez the winds, an' ez purty ez a flower."

"And in return for those compromising papers my father agreed to give me to you?"

"He did. It war a squar' trade. When I found you, I took back his papers."

"But didn't he attempt to shoot you?"

"Well, no, though he wanted to repudiate the bargain."

"Heaven, I thank Thee!" cried the girl. "He loves me still."

"But he daren't try to find you!" was the quick menace. "What ef I hev copies ov those papers? When a feller plays such a game ez I'm playin' in these parts, he's got to perfect himself at every p'int. Jack Bodine thinks a good deal ov you, gal; but he thinks more ov his neck; the governor of New Mexico wants to stretch it. Now, do you think he will hunt fur you? Hedn't you better throw up the game, fur I hold the trumps, an' you can't rake in a single trick. I'm not a desp'rit man, although my life bez been carried on a bowie's p'int from Oregon to the Gulf. When I used to hold you on my knee, I warn't a scholar in the border school-house. Since then I've graduated at the head of my class, they say; an' I'm now at liberty to go back an' be somebody ag'in. Now—"

"Stop!" cried the girl. "You were Texas the border rough then, you are Texas the ruffian now. A thousand loves could not refine you. You insult me when you approach a subject so hateful as the offer of your love. My father may have made the trade you speak of; but I repudiate it, and I believe that since the return of those papers he has cursed himself a thousand times."

"He warn't in the best ov humor, when I left 'im," was the ruffian's response. "He even went so far as to swear that he'd look arter me."

"Bravo!" cried the girl. Texas grated his teeth, and took a hasty stride forward.

"What's thet?" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I said bravo! for my father's oath. Shall I repeat it?"

She had not retreated a step, but stood proudly erect more beautiful than ever.

"Say what you please," cried Texas, halting in front of her. "I wouldn't harm my future bride for the world. You can't make me lay violent hands on you, fur ef I touched you I'd crush my valley rose. Go on! spit your venom at Texas; but jes' remember that I'm goin' to win this fight even ef I hev to do some ov the tallest killin' ever done in the deadly South-west."

He turned his back on the girl as he finished and deliberately walked toward the corridor.

All at once he wheeled and faced her again.

"I'm ov a notion to tell you whose life I saved to-night," he said.

She did not speak.

"Wal, ef you don't want to know I kin save some grammar."

"Do as you please."

"Hol hol ye'r blamed independent. I saved thet young white Injun."

Bessie started, and a ray of hope seemed to light up her eyes. It did not escape Texas's notice.

"I saved the little viper when I could hev squared his accounts with death," he went on. "I owed him one because he rescued my future wife from the bufler."

"Your future wife? Where is she?" asked Bessie.

Texas looked amazed hardly knowing whether to laugh or not.

"Hyar!" he cried seizing her arm and looking into her face. "I'm standin' before the future Mrs. Texas, the purtiest gal south ov the Arkansas."

A singular sparkle seemed to illumine the girl's orbs, and the next moment she jerked her arm from his grasp and was laughing with derision and defiance in his very face.

"What! me become your wife?" she exclaimed suddenly relapsing into seriousness. "When you attempt to carry out your threat you may discover that the daughter of fighting Jack Bodine can hit a human eye at sixty paces!"

Texas attempted to laugh at the girl's threat, but scored a failure, and without a reply turned away.

"I'm goin' to give you a chance to shoot. I am, by hokey!" he shot over his shoulder. "I wouldn't be the Texas ov other days ef I took water now!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TEXAS IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

TEXAS went down the narrow corridor to the mouth of the cavern, there to execute a sudden halt for the smell of burning grass had greeted his olfactories.

"A fire in the valley!" he exclaimed. "Some ov the cap'n's work, I'll bet, fur he's allus firin' suthin'. When he hunts he burns, an' when he's hunted it's the same—fire! fire, all the time! I'll go down an' investigate."

The speaker did not quit the spot until he had rolled the bowlder against the mouth of the cave. Then he rejoined his horse, and with the bridle-rein in his bronze hand proceeded toward the valley.

Many of the rough characters that render our frontiers debatable ground, men who carry their lives in their hands, possess the proverbial curiosity of women. Texas was one of these. Bessie of Silver Valley was in his power at last; but in the firing of the verdure he recognized the hand of an enemy who might be nearer than he thought.

He led his steed to the foot of the hills and there listened as though confident that some figure must come out of the darkness. The fire had spent its force and died, but the disagreeable smoke still filled the air and hung over the hills behind Texas like a pall.

All at once the outlaw dropped the rein and started.

"Pish! Texas, what ar' you comin' to when a snake scares you?" he exclaimed a moment later laughing at his start. "Ef it war a Comanche, you might hev an excuse fur jumpin'; but a fire-frightened snake—Texas, you'd better go home to yer mother."

The ruffian was thoroughly disgusted with his display of fright, and was exhibiting this disgust in sentences similar to the one just recorded when something fell on his shoulders.

This time he sprung away with a cry of horror on his lips as that something tightened, and he found himself caught by an Indian lasso! The first noise was now explained; the snake was fleeing from the creeping figure of a Comanche warrior.

If the rope had confined its work to his neck, Texas might have severed it with his bowie, but it had tightened about his chest, and his arms were pinioned to his sides. That there was more than one Indian at the end of the cord he soon discovered for he was unceremoniously jerked forward and brought up standing in the midst of a dozen mounted Comanches.

"Wal, this beats my best time," ejaculated the border ruffian, surveying the red-skins. "What could I hev been thinkin' about not to hev heard ye come up?"

"White man think all by himself," was the reply of the stalwart Comanche who leaned forward and almost thrust his nose into Texas's face. "Comanches fixed for a still hunt. Look at horses."

The moon and the stars showed the muzzles that kept the horses quiet, and the grass bound about their hoofs.

"You must hev been lookin' fur me," he said.

"Black Mustang find wrong man, but mebbe him know whar Topknot is?"

Texas started at the name.

"I've seen the boy, an' thet lately, too," he said quickly. "So you ar' the youngster's pards?"

"Topknot is the young white eagle of the Comanches."

"Jes' so. I don't object to thet. He kin be a dozen eagles ef he wants to. I'm Texas!" and the man drew his figure up to its true height.

"Black Mustang don't care," was the haughty rejoinder. "Him wants to find Topknot."

"I don't happen to hev a d'rectory in my pocket jes' now, but I might post you anyhow ef you take this rope off ov my carkins."

At a sign from the Comanche chief the lasso dropped at Texas's feet. It was evident that the band had bagged unexpected game, and Texas, having recovered from his fear and chagrin, was beginning to plan a way out of the muddle. He assured Black Mustang that he had lately encountered the youth, and located the spot of the encounter.

"Good!" cried the chief. "White brother go 'long to show Black Mustang."

Texas grated his teeth.

"Sartinly I'll go," he said, assuming a willingness that deceived the Comanche. "I wouldn't hev you doubt my word fur the world. I've nothin' particular to do in these parts, an' I'd jes' ez soon sarve my red brethren ez my white ones."

A few moments later Texas left the spot of his surprise at the head of the Comanche band.

He was leaving Bessie Bodine behind, but with the determination of returning to her if he had to fight his way back.

At the first opportunity he loosened his bowie and cocked his revolvers.

"I'll bide my time," he muttered. "Thar will be more'n one Injun knockin' fur admission to the happy huntin' ground afore day. Ten year ago I used to hunt sich predicaments ez this, an' I guess I'm equal to the occasion yet."

If the red-skins suspected their captive they did not betray themselves, but more than one eagle eye never left him for a moment.

Texas at least was playing fair, for he conducted the party to the mouth of the gulch where he had left our hero, Little Topknot. There he halted.

"We ar' hyar," he said turning to the Comanche chief. "Hyar's whar I did the youngster a favor. From thet p'int you kin trail 'im."

Already several Comanches were on the ground which they were subjecting to a close examination. The hoof-prints of White Lightning were soon found and reported to the chief who had not dismounted.

"What kind of horse Topknot ride?" he asked of Texas.

"A white one—the boss hoss ov Silver Valley."

"Jack's!"

"Yes, Jack's."

The chief turned to give his trailers a new command. His eagle eyes no longer regarded Texas, and a rapid glance told the ruffian that he was for the moment comparatively unnoticed.

"Now fur a new ticket at St. Peter's gate!" fell from his lips as he darted at Black Mustang knife in hand and the flash of the steel was followed by a wild cry and the reeling body of the Comanche chief!

"You'd better kill yer snakes ez you ketch 'em!" he cried straightening in the saddle with the bowie between his teeth and a heavy revolver in each hand.

The Indians, paralyzed for a moment by the loss of their great war-chief, shrunk from the slayer who did not hesitate to open on them with the weapons of death.

Three fell in rapid succession before his deadly aim, and then before he could fire again a loud voice and the crack of new revolver came from the shadows of the bushes at his left.

"The Jayhawks!" said Texas. "They're helpin' the worst enemy they've got on earth when they give me a lift."

"Forward! Jayhawks, an' help yer pard!" cried a voice. "We're not savin' the young skunk but a man what hez been corraled by the Comanches."

The Indian turned from Texas to face the more numerous enemy. Several of their number had fallen before the unexpected volley, and as the Jayhawks dashed into view they were met by several arrows which, hastily fired, did no damage.

Texas withheld his fire for he saw that the fight could now be finished by the border outlaws. He saw the Comanches separate at the second volley, and catching sight of an opening which would lead him past the Jayhawks, he gave his horse the spur.

But at the same moment an Indian darted at his bridle-rein and caught it, thus throwing his horse back. Texas was almost unseated, and as he made an effort to retain the saddle, his revolvers were lost! He had no weapons now excepting the bowie between his teeth.

His horse wheeled half way round and darted away with the Comanche at the rein, and his steed alongside.

The twain dashed through the ranks of the Jayhawks, and almost outstripped the bullets that were sent after them.

The half-naked warrior lay on his horse's neck, with one hand at the white man's bridle, and the other lost somewhere in his steed's mane.

"I'm tired ov this," hissed Texas, leaning toward his foe with his bowie in his right hand. "I'm much obliged to you fur yer kindness, but I'm goin' to cancel the debt in the usual manner!"

His arm shot at the Comanche's side as he spoke, and the blow was given. But the Indian did not utter a cry; not a muscle quivered. The hand was still at the rein.

Puzzled and chagrined, Bessie Bodine's rough wooer struck again, with the same result.

"Mebbe—"

He did not complete the observation, but put up his knife and darted at the red wrist at the rein.

A thrill must have shot through his entire

frame as he grasped it, for it was stiff and cold! He tried to wrench the hand loose, but death was in the gripe! Then he seized the bridles, one in each hand, and threw his whole strength in an effort to stop the horses. His own steed obeyed him; the Comanche's he subdued. The horses stopped at the head of a pass through the hills, and as they did so, the dead hand suddenly relaxed its hold and the Comanche rolled from his perch to the ground.

"A corpse doesn't make a good pard," said Texas, gazing at the Indian. "He hed a bullet in his heart when he darted at my rein. The Jayhawks wiped 'im out at the second volley, an' I've carried 'im to this spot. Whew! Texas, you'll never furgit yer ride with the dead Injun. Now I'll go back to my bird."

"When you've done me a service, not before!" said a voice that made him start. "You are Texas, the man above all men I want to meet. Don't lie to me, for I have just heard your name from your own lips. Don't draw. I've got the drop on you, and you know that I can shoot."

"Draw, Jack Bodine!" echoed the frontier ruffian. "I've got nothin' but a bowie. Ar' you goin' to break yer word? Thar may be others besides Texas who know that the governor ov New Mexico wants you."

"Silence!" thundered the man who confronted Texas. "I'm doing the best act of my life. Dismount."

The command was obeyed.

"Now stand where you are with empty hands above your head, or I'll make you as still as the Indian on the ground."

As he finished the ranchman stepped back a pace and stooped over an object which until that moment had escaped the outlaw's attention.

The next moment he approached the horse carrying a girlish form in his arms.

Texas uttered a cry and started back.

"It is Inez Manuella, the Governor's daughter," said Bodine, as he placed his burden on the horse. "I'm doing the best I can to repair the past. You can go and tell the authorities what you please now. I am going to kill the man who robbed this poor child of her right hand."

As the ranch-owner finished he showed Texas that the white faced girl had but one hand.

"I'll help you, by my knife!" exclaimed the ruffian.

"You help me?" was the response. "One of us has got to kill the other."

Texas drew his knife.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LIFE FOR A HAND.

THE ranchman of Silver Valley did not notice Texas's menace until he had placed the girl securely on the horse.

Then he turned upon the stalwart ruffian, and for the first time seemed to see the drawn bowie. From the knife he looked up and the eyes of the two men met.

"You hev jes' said that one ov us hed to kill the other, curnel," said Texas returning Bodine's look with interest. "I'm ready fur the tussle."

As he finished he drew back and braced himself for a duel with the knife.

But Bodine did not draw; with his left hand he steadied the almost helpless girl on the horse while his right hung carelessly and weaponless at his side.

His calmness irritated and maddened the desperado.

"Ar'n't you goin' to fight me?" he cried. "Ef one ov us hez to wipe out the other hyar's one ov the best chances we'll ever get fur the play. No spectators but the gal, an' she won't interrupt us."

"One of us must kill the other, but not here," said Bodine.

"You're afraid!" hissed Texas.

Bodine's lip curled proudly and with contempt.

"Afraid, and of you?" he cried. "When did I learn to fear you? I do but one thing at a time; you know that, for you've seen me tried before. My first duty is to save the life of that young girl, my next to kill the man who robbed her of her hand."

"Then you'll pay yer respects to me I s'pose?"

"I will."

"You may never find your man."

"Don't give yourself any uneasiness on that ground. I think I know him."

"You think you do?"

Bodine did not reply.

"Where did you find her?" asked Texas, glancing at Inez.

"Down yonder in the valley, in the grave which the robber of her hand had made for her."

Texas looked astonished, but Bodine continued before he could speak:

"It wasn't the same kind of grave that Captain Bullet made for me a few hours ago. This one was all grass, and there I accidentally discovered the child I stole years ago because I hated her father. I had to fight for her after I had found her. A Comanche, it seems, had trailed me, and came up just after I had taken Inez, almost dead, from her strange tomb. There was a brief struggle, but I am here to say that the Indian sleeps his last sleep in the grass, if the fire has not burned his coffin."

All this time Texas was looking curiously at the girl, whose pale but wild loveliness appeared to striking advantage in the moonlight.

"So she's going to forgive you, Jack?" he suddenly inquired.

"I shall never ask her to," was the answer.

"I am going to save her life; that is my duty."

"Ov course it is. But ar' you goin' to take 'er down to the ranch?"

"I may."

"Jes' ez ef you war sart'in it still stood."

"What do you mean? Has Captain Bullet destroyed my house?"

"Ef the fire got to the gap why shouldn't it go on and blast Silver Valley?"

Bodine's eyes flashed madly.

"What do you think? Tell me!" he cried.

"I think you won't find yer shanty able to perfect the gal."

For a moment the ranchman seemed unable to utter a word. The ruffian's observation had dazed him.

"I'll go and see!" he said at last. "Woe to Captain Bullet if his fire reached my ranch!"

Bodine turned from Texas and began to converse with the girl, who, during the talk just recorded, had listened without speaking.

"Why doesn't he say a word about Bessie?" asked Texas of himself. "Hez he furgotten the child in his excitement? I'm gettin' off remarkably well considerin' the tussles I've had to-night."

The ranchman had apparently forgotten his own child, the lovely creature whom he had bartered for a few damaging papers. The finding of the daughter of the man he had foully wronged in years gone by, and in a wounded condition, had caused him to forget his own troubles.

Texas was not disposed to detain Bodine with further conversation. A renewal of the conference might bring him back to Bessie's situation, and the border wolf was willing to quit.

"Good-by, curnel," he said as Bodine laid his hand on the rein to lead the horse away. "I donate thet hoss to the cause ye'r sarvin' jes' now. We'll meet ag'in."

"Adieu, sir," was the curt answer, and then Texas heard a name which he was inwardly hoping would not drop from the ranchman's lips.

"Before long I'm going to call you to account in a certain matter that deeply affects me," continued Bodine. "Bessie is, I believe, in your hands. You treat her harshly at your peril. I am still Jack Bodine, the ex-captain of the Iron Band, and I am Bessie's father, too!"

That was all.

The ranchman turned away and deliberately led the horse from the spot, while Texas gazed after him with a puzzled expression and with wonder in his eyes.

"The guvnor's daughter first, then his own, eh?" he exclaimed when he could find his tongue. "He always war an enigma, even when he war killin' on the Rio Hondo. Texas, luck still follers you. You must be the favorit' child ov fortune, when sich a man ez Jack Bodine walks off an' leaves you with yer vital apparatus in workin' condition. He kin straighten matters with the guvnor; but while he's doin' that, Bessie is likely to become Madame Texas. Good-by, Jack. Success to yer mission; but don't fool with fire the next time you have a chance to put it out. One ov us hez to kill the other some day. I see that now; but I'm goin' to be survivor. Mark my prophecy!"

A glance at the dead Indian still lying at his feet, and Texas pounced upon him like a springing hyena. The dead body was overturned and the border ruffian's hand inspected the belt, but nothing rewarded him.

"Not even a knife!" he growled in a dissatisfied tone as he rose. "I can't add to my armory," and he glanced at his own bowie. "However, I may not need lead or steel between hyar an' my bird cage."

He left the spot with this huge knife clutched

tightly in his right hand, ready for use at a second's notice.

Jack Bodine was advancing slowly over a rough mountain path. His left hand steadied the young girl on the horse, and his eyes were almost constantly fixed upon her. She appeared asleep, but the keen observer would have seen that she was watching the man through the long silken fringe of her pallid eyelids.

Once or twice she shuddered as if the presence of the ranchman was repulsive. Her wrist had been dressed and rested in a rude sling made by the hand that touched her.

The night was fast wearing away; its wild and exciting adventures were soon to end, and morning threatened to receive Bodine and Inez at the edge of the hills.

Suddenly Jack stopped the horse, and threw an anxious look ahead. He had reached the foot of the hills, a plain was before him. Above it hung a cloud of smoke.

Inez opened her eyes wide, and fixed them on her guide.

"Texas was right," said Bodine. "The fire has desolated my ranch."

He threw these words through clinched teeth.

"I am sorry," came a voice from above the saddle. "But I do not crave shelter there. I want to go back to—"

She hesitated, for Jack Bodine had wheeled and fastened his dark, mad eyes upon her.

"I know—to Juarez Manuello, the governor," he said. "I might also say—to the man who will pistol me for bringing his lost child home!"

"He will not do that," was the soft reply.

"He will keep his oath. I know him. He belongs to that class of men who never break a vow."

The girl did not speak.

"He will never know me as Jack Bodine, the finder of his Inez—never! To him I am and will ever be the captain of the Iron Band—the man who robbed him of his baby girl. He will pistol me, I tell you; but I am going to take you home."

Still Inez kept silent, but a quick start on her part told Bodine that her keen ears had heard the same sound that had aroused the horse.

Voices!

"Ef I hed it to do over, I wouldn't strike so hard," said an uncultivated tongue whose owner was hidden by some bushes that grew at the base of the hill. "She held onto the bridle like grim death, and I struck with all my might with the big bowie, not at her hand, boy—I'd sw'ar to thet a thousand times—but at the leather. The hoss must hev seen the flash ov the blade an' started, fur I cut her wrist through an' through, an' she tumbled into my arms."

The last word was finished as two horses came in sight from the bushes.

Inez uttered a low cry of recognition.

"Tis he!—the man who robbed me of my hand!" she said.

"I know 'im—Big Horn Dick," fell from Bodine's lips as he advanced a stride.

The next moment the sharp report of a revolver awoke the sleeping echoes of the romantic spot, and one of the riders uttered a wild death-cry as he reeled from his saddle and fell against his companion, a youth.

The boy pushed the body aside, and, as it slid to the ground between the two horses, he stood erect in the stirrups with a cocked pistol in his hand.

But, after a glance at Bodine, he lowered the weapon and rode forward.

A minute later the twain were looking into each other's faces over clasped hands.

CHAPTER XV.

FOLLOWED BY FATE.

CAPTAIN BULLET, with the blaze of his last fire behind him, galloped toward the camp on the Washita.

He entered it at daybreak, and roused the few men who had remained behind to guard it. They were surprised to see him return alone.

He mustered them, seven in number, near, on the bank of the stream, and addressed them from the saddle:

"The camp an' the hosses ar' yours, boys," he said. "Stay hyar ef you want to, er pull up stakes an' travel."

"Whar ar' the Hoods?" ventured one of the most curious.

"No questions an' no lies!" was the response.

Before the seven could comprehend the situation Captain Bullet the raider of the Texan border had disappeared. The men stared at one another, too much amazed to speak.

"Suthin's up," said one at last. "Hev ye furgotten the big light last night?"

"No!" chorused the listening six.

"The boys warn't fur from thet fire. They may be thar still. The cap'n's retracing his steps. Who'll foller me?"

The six instantly volunteered; but the man who had assumed the leadership of the excited men held up his hand.

"Two will do," he said. "I'll take Red Bill an' Blanca Hank. Git yer revolvers."

The two men designated were already leaving the group. Five minutes after they reappeared on the scene, mounted and armed to the teeth.

Woe to Captain Bullet if the trio should discover that he had injured one of his Red Hoods.

Unconscious of the vendetta at his horse's heels, the raider was riding toward the valley blackened by his fire. The healthful breezes of morn fanned his bronzed cheeks, and toyed with the long hairs of his Mexicanish mustache.

"When one doesn't see an enemy die, he doubts," he muttered. "I give him a ballsquar' at his breast; but when I go back to the grave I find it empty—no ranchman thar, an' no blood. Mebbe the fire overtook 'im, an' mebbe it didn't. I must know. The more I think, the more I want to know. He an' the boy, Santa Fe's spawn, hev formed a league which means vengeance for the past, an' death to Cap'n Bullet. I'm my own boss now; no Red Hoods to watch me, an' to growl over the spoil, an' no camp jackals to steal the bones. I feel like cheerin'. Free at last! No men to look arter. Cap'n, a new career is before you."

The man smiled; he even took off his wide-brimmed ranchero hat and waved it triumphantly over his head.

He left the hills with the sun in his face, and galloped across the remains of the grass whose life his fire had destroyed.

He was armed with pistols, knife and carbine, the latter weapon hanging from his belt ready to be raised and fired.

That restless curiosity which guides murderers back to the scenes of their crimes, led Captain Bullet on. He did not draw rein until his horse shied at an opening in the ground. He leaned forward and gazed for a moment into the gap.

"Empty still!" fell from his tongue as he straightened in the saddle. "Mebbe he wore a bullet-proof vest. He used to do it in the days of the Iron Band. Why didn't I try his head last night? that warn't bullet-proof, I know."

He gave the tenantless grave a parting glance as he rode by, and then struck the horse savagely with his spurs.

"I'd give my right arm to meet 'im jes' now ef he really lives!" he exclaimed. "I'd go a mile out of my road to see the boy—Santa Fe's young cub—what I left to the vultures on the rock. Tom Savage got his deserts fur savin' the cub. Shasta Sam did the work I could not reach, an' I hed to see 'im drop dead at my feet—shot by thet youngster—an' not be allowed to avenge him! The next time, my prairie viper, there will be no Comanches to back you. I made short work ov the father in the Rio Dolores, an' when I heard thet Comanche Tom hed been to the rock, I knowed thet some day or other I'd be obliged to sarve the boy the same way."

The first valley had been crossed by this time, and the chief of the Red Hoods was riding over a rough path toward the second. Under his horse's feet were remnants of burned grass, and Captain Bullet chuckled audibly when he saw that the fire had preceded him.

"Silver Valley doesn't look ez purty ez it did when Texas an' I came down hyar arter White Lightning," he exclaimed, as the new view, blackened and desolate, burst upon his sight.

The fire had crept through the gap and ignited the grass of the valley where Jack Bodine had buried himself from the vengeance of the Governor of New Mexico.

Captain Bullet advanced with a gallop toward a group of trees visible from the spot where he had entered the valley.

But he suddenly drew rein, and shaded his eyes as he rose in the stirrups.

"Buller!" he said, a moment later. "The big-horns hev a grudge ag'in' me, fur I burned their pasture up. By Jehu! they're comin' this way like mad. Suthin's behind 'em! Injuns? We won't go on, Apache, till we see."

His last remark was addressed to his horse.

"They're goin' to leave us alone, fur they're pullin' off to the left," he said, a minute later, as he galloped on once more. "We'll inspect the ranch a little, an' then, mebbe, we'll hunt a steak, er a tongue."

The group of trees became more distinct as the raider advanced, and he soon discovered that fire had embrowned their foliage.

He halted among the trees and gazed upon the ruins of a hacienda. His eyeballs flashed like living sparks, for he was in the presence of the ruined home of his enemy, Jack Bodine.

"Ef I hev made ez short wrck ov him ez I hev ov his ranch, I'll hev only the cub an' Texas to settle with," fell from his lips. "Then I'll go back to my old stampin' ground on the Colorado an' begin life over with a clean deck. An' one ov these days I may take Quartz Jim's seat in the Colorado Legislatur', an'—"

His airy castles were suddenly overturned by an object which had darted downward through the trees like a swallow and fallen at his horse's feet.

Captain Bullet uttered an exclamation as he stared at the object which was nothing less than an Indian arrow.

"Whar did thet come from?" he cried turning in his saddle.

His question was the next moment answered, and he unslung his carbine.

"The Comanche knows how to divide a herd; their still hunt beats my best time. But they don't see me, thank Jupiter!"

The raider comprehended the situation in an instant. The herd of buffalo which he had seen a few minutes before had been divided by a band of Indian hunters, and that portion selected for doom had been driven toward the ruined ranch. They had halted so near that Captain Bullet could see their glaring eyeballs. The mystery of the arrow was at once explained; discharged from a Comanche bow, it had glanced from a horn to shoot into the air and then to fall at his feet!

"The reddies will pounce upon the shaggy heads in a minute," Bullet said as he gazed. "What ef they should come this way? Oh, I'm a match fur all the Injuns an' buffler thet ever ran at large. I'm Captain Bullet, without a page torn out!"

He saw the animals thus brought to bay by the Indians' turn, as he made his boast, and, almost the next moment, seized with one of those terrible panics that make a wild herd restless, they came straight toward his cover.

He watched them with steady eye as they rushed on, as if determined to charge the ruined ranch.

"I'll surprise the Injuns!" he said, "fur I'm the last chap they expect to see in these parts."

The horse stood his ground well; he seemed to trust for safety to the carbine that touched his fox-like ear.

On came the plunging herd, but Captain Bullet withheld his fire until the leaders of the band were about the little grove. Then a jet of fire leaped from the carbine's barrel, and the bull of the herd staggered back against his companions and quivered with the throes of death. A second shot, as fatal as the first, opened a lane through the plunging mass, and a grim smile wreathed the raider's face as the two divisions passed by.

"I thought I'd astonish you!" he exclaimed gazing at the Indians who sat bolt upright on their steeds just beyond the trees. "Didn't think I war hyar, eh? Ov course not. Now jes' lift a finger, ef you dare!"

He rode forward as he finished and showed himself to the astonished buffalo-hunters.

"Whar's yer chief—Black Mustang?" he cried.

A rough laugh was the response, and the one from whose throat it came threw off the head-dress that he wore.

"Cap'n Bullet, by hokey!" he cried.

"Don't call us Comanches. We're the Jay-hawks ov Texas."

"Then take my compliments!" was the answer, and a bullet from the captain's carbine emptied the laughter's saddle.

Then, before the disguised Jayhawks could recover, the chief of the Red Hoods was flying across the valley at a speed that threatened to overtake the buffaloes.

But once he looked back, and saw that he was pursued.

"I kin reach the Tinoso Mounds because I've got the best horse," he cried with glee; but the next second he was staring at a single horseman who had suddenly come in sight on his left.

The stranger seemed to be riding for the same objective point—the Tinoso Mounds—yet he was not pursued. Captain Bullet kept his eyes fastened on the mysterious person; he did not seem to fear the enemies behind.

"We'll meet at the same p'int among the Mounds ef I keep straight on," he suddenly ejaculated, and then he added with an oath:

"I know 'im now! We hed to meet sometime. I've kept fur the boy the hand thet wiped out the father!"

Nearer and nearer the two approached each other.

The identity of the stranger was no longer a question.

It was Little Topknot!

CHAPTER XVI.

SHOT IN THE EYE.

FROM that moment the chief of the Red Hoods rode on with his finger at the trigger of his carbine.

His eyes continually measured the distance between him and the boy Comanche. He was waiting for Little Topknot to come within range; then he would end at least one vendetta. All at once the youth's figure disappeared.

"A reg'lar Comanche trick!" growled the captain. "I've see'd 'em do that a thousand times. I couldn't hit a ha'r ov the cub ef I war the best shot in twenty States!"

His observation was truth itself, for the boy had concealed his body in a manner that kept his enemy from dispatching him.

"I kin git away from him an' hunt for a time when he can't hide behind a horse's neck! Thet time will soon come!" he grated.

Captain Bullet's finger left the trigger, and he turned his attention to escape. The country of the Tinoso Mounds was now ready to receive him, and as he crossed the dividing line between hill and plain he sent up a shout that must have reached the ear of every pursuer.

The Jayhawks had witnessed the new pursuit; they had noticed the desperate efforts put forth by the boy to reach the raider before they could avenge the death of their comrade, besides paying a number of old scores long due. They, therefore, had urged their steeds to utmost exertion, and when Little Topknot reached the Mounds with his enemy out of sight, the clatter of the hoofs of the Jayhawks' steeds rung in his ears.

"They sha'n't overtake him at least," grated the boy. "I'll do my worst foe a favor now. I'll save his life!"

He wheeled his horse as he finished and thrust a pair of revolvers into the faces of the advancing outlaws.

"Stand!" he cried. "Try to pass me and die!"

Instantly every horse was reined in, and their riders stared aghast into the stern face that looked over the outstretched weapons.

"Captain Bullet is my property!" continued Little Topknot breaking the silence. "You will follow him at the risk of your lives, for I will kill the man who attempts to take him."

"Mebbe you don't know us," was the reply. "We ain't Injuns."

"Your dress didn't deceive me. You don't ride like true Comanches. You are the Jayhawks of Texas."

"We ar', by hokey!"

"Then go back. I don't want your blood. I've shed enough of it already. Go back."

The men exchanged glances.

"Ar' you Cap'n Bullet's pard?" was one of the results of a whispered consultation among the Jayhawks which the boy avenger did not hear.

"I am his deadliest foe!"

"You're huntin' his heart then?"

"No; his eye!"

"A bullet in the one stops the other. We'll go back."

"When I have settled with Captain Bullet you may call me to account," said Little Topknot. "All I ask now is to be let alone."

"Good-by, youngster. Ef you giv' the cap'n one squarly in the eye, the Jayhawks will cancel all orders ag'in' you."

The border outlaws waved our hero a parting, and the next moment they were riding away with their broad backs to him.

"Better luck than I expected," muttered the white Indian, as they disappeared along the distant horizon. "Bodine and his charge must continue the journey to Santa Fe alone, for I shall not attempt to rejoin them until I have settled with my father's enemy and my old foe. This is the country of the Tinoso Mounds. Well, it is not new to me, for more than once I have visited it with my Indian guardian, Black Mustang."

A new light seemed to illumine Little Topknot's eyes as he urged his horse over the path, in whose peculiar earth he saw the fresh tracks of another horse. He was at last close to Captain Bullet, and that worthy was alone. As he has said, the locality was not unknown to him, for during his residence with the Comanches he had repeatedly visited the Tinoso Mounds, or, more properly, hills, the buffaloes' paradise and the mustangs' retreat.

And to be alone there with the man he had hunted for years, the murderer of his father and his own attempted destroyer, was satisfaction to the boy.

This time Captain Bullet should not escape. Among the Tinoso hills the bullet of the avenger should find his evil eye.

Meanwhile, where was the last of the border raiders?

He, too, knew the region into which he had plunged. He had shot, stolen and hunted among the Tinoso Mounds. It was a country full of echoes, and therefore apt to betray the mounted hunter. It was betraying the boy.

Seated on his jaded horse half-way up a hill, and in the middle of a path, Captain Bullet was using his eyes and listening. He knew that Little Topknot was nearing his post; the echoes of the locality told him this.

His eyes blazed with an intenser flame as the seconds passed away. He would see his hunter first, and then the advantageous shot which would end forever the feud between them! The horse came on, shortening the distance at each succeeding moment, until Captain Bullet suddenly started and thrust his revolver forward as he held his breath. In another minute the hunter would be in sight, and then the pressure of the deadly trigger.

"They sometimes win who run, my young white Comanche!" fell in triumphant accents from his tongue. "You're walkin' into a death-trap thet never let a victim escape. Ha! another step. Thar's the hoss's muzzle!"

The next second the head of the horse came into plain view, and then the whole body; but Captain Bullet did not fire!

The saddle was empty!

The countenance of the eager killer fell.

"Another infernal Injun trick; I'll bet my boots on it!" broke from his lips as he began to scrutinize his surroundings.

"All's fair in war, captain," exclaimed a voice in his rear.

He turned despite his coolness, and saw his young hunter standing erect in the path, hardly fifty feet away with a revolver in his hand. And the formidable weapon was held in such a position that the last of the border raiders could gaze into the barrel!

"I spared you the other day at the head of your band for this moment," said the youth.

"I had hoped to finish your career in the midst of the Red Hoods, but your torch has deprived me of that vengeance. Fifteen years ago the affair of the Rio Dolores took place. You haven't forgotten it. There my father, Colonel Santa Fe, was shot in the eye, and by you! Two days after the murder, I, a mere babe, was tied to a naked rock hundreds of feet above the sea, and left there for the scavengers of the air. The hand that slew the father tied the son to the stone. Comanche Tom saved the boy's life, but he, brave fellow, fell by your man in the Red Hills country. You saw Shasta Sam, his slayer, fall by my hand; he was shot in the eye, just where I am going to shoot you, captain!"

Did Captain Bullet start?

No! he sent an oath across the short distance—an epithet that made Little Topknot bite his lips.

"Your time has come," he cried. "Here terminates the revenge made possible by the affair of the Rio Dolores."

"Shoot!"

It was Captain Bullet's last word, for his lips had not ceased to quiver with it when he pitched forward, clear over his horse's head, and struck the ground with a disgusting thud.

Little Topknot went forward, and as he passed the body he gave it one look.

One eye, wide-open, stared at the sky above; the other was filled with blood. Shot in the eye, Captain Bullet would trouble the ranches no more!

The young avenger remounted his horse, and started on again.

"Now for Bessie and Texas," he said audibly. "Then back to the Comanches again—if the girl does not give me more than a smile."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST BULLET.

THE end of the border vendetta was near at hand.

Jack Bodine and Inez Manuella were pushing resolutely across the Texan country with their faces turned toward Santa Fe.

More than once the beautiful girl after watching him through her long silken lashes had said in her gentle way:

"You have saved my life and I want to see yours preserved. Turn back now and let me

go on; we are getting out of the dangerous country. You are riding to certain death for my father will take vengeance for the past."

To these words the ranchman had always returned a smile.

"I am going to restore you to the governor!" he would say. "I shall make all the reparation in my power if he kills me the next minute."

A few days later Bodine reined in his steed and pointed to a collection of elegant buildings that graced the richest hacienda in New Mexico.

Tears came into the girl's eyes as she gazed. It was home once more; the ranch-owner's look told her this.

"For the last time I entreat you to go back!" she said to Bodine in an imploring tone.

"I go to the end!" was the reply.

They rode forward again, and soon confronted an elegantly dressed New Mexican of middle age who was enjoying a cigar on his piazza.

"The governor," murmured Bodine. "He hasn't changed much."

At sight of the couple Manuella left his cosey chair and advanced.

The next moment the eyes of the old enemies met.

"Great heavens!" cried the ex-governor. "The captain of the Iron Band!"

Bodine smiled faintly and waved his hand at Inez.

"My reparation, governor. Your child!" he said.

Manuella turned and encountered the gaze of Bodine's companion. A mist seemed to float before his eyes, and a wild cry of joy welled from his throat as he sprang forward. An instant later he held his child in his arms!

Bodine looked calmly on from his saddle; he was waiting without a quiver for the Mexican's revenge.

Suddenly Manuella started forward as his daughter slid from his arms into those of a faithful peon.

"Captain, you must have heard of my oath!" he cried.

"I have," was the answer. "I am here; keep it! Jack Bodine makes all the reparation that lies in his power. He stole your child, but he killed the man that took her hand—Big Horn Dick!"

Something seemed to turn the New Mexican from his resolution; his hand left the butt of the half-drawn revolver.

"Go!" he cried. "You have stolen, but you have also killed, and, in killing, you have avenged. This is the mercy of Manuella."

Bodine seemed to doubt the speaker's sincerity. The next moment the ex-governor stood at his side and was looking up into his face.

"Inez has saved you. She says that you have a daughter to find, and a girl-stealer to kill. Go and do your duty. I have failed to do mine!"

As he finished he caught Bodine's bridle and turned his steed's head to the north, then he struck the animal with his hand, and the man who expected death was borne away.

"Better than I expected," muttered Jack. "Manuella had a right to kill me. I belonged to him. Now, since he has spared my life, I will do the duty that lies before me."

"Wal, I've succeeded at last, an' two ov the best pieces of hoss flesh on the border ar' waitin' fur us on the outside. I hed to wipe out a Comanche fur each hoss, but what does thet matter? I war out ov meat an' hed to have 'em. Now fur the great Arkansaw kentry, my wild flower, an' then to the land whar you shel bloom, the purtiest rose in the hull diggin's."

The speaker was of course our old acquaintance, Texas, and his listener Bessie Bodine, still an inmate of the cavern in the hill.

A week had passed since the ruffian's encounter with Jack Bodine—a week spent by the plotter in a hunt for horses, found at last by the loss of two lives.

Bessie did not reply to his rough announcement, but followed him to the mouth of the cavern where she was soon seated on the back of one of the Indian steeds.

"Ho! fur Colorado!" cried Texas springing into the saddle, and showing his captive a face aglow with the triumph of the frontier devil.

They reached the frontier of the hills, she unarmed and apparently reconciled to her fate, he well fixed for an encounter with any kind of foe. Besides the heavy revolvers that once more supplied his belt with death, he carried the rifle of the border across his saddle-bow.

Many were the covert glances that the Wild Rose of Silver Valley shot at this weapon. He saw not one of them.

"Now or never! Fortune favor me!" suddenly said the girl to herself.

The next moment she darted at the rifle and snatched it from Texas's hands, and before he could recover from the attack her horse was carrying her away at a breakneck speed.

An oath fell from his lips.

"I might hev thought she would do suthin' fur thar's Bodine blood in her. But I'll catch the beauty. I didn't do a bad thing when I giv her the poorest boss. I hed an eye to bizness when I did thet.

The chase began before the ruffian finished speaking. He was pursuing with that smile which anticipates ultimate success.

He had the better horse. This fact was demonstrated a minute after the race began.

On across the valley sped the girl and her pursuer. She seemed to be eager to reach a dark spot far away, a clump of timber in which she might elude him.

She rode like a queen of the arena and the horse appeared conscious of the worth of his burden for he strained every limb.

But Texas gained on her. The girl saw this in swift glances over her shoulder. She might reach the trees, but they would not save her for he would then be at her horse's heels.

Bessie cocked the rifle.

"I told him that I could hit an eye at sixty paces!" she said. "I must make good my assertion, or become his unwilling wife."

She stopped and wheeled.

Texas was coming down upon her at full speed. He seemed to forget that she carried death in her hand for when she reined in her jaded horse at the fringe of timber, an exclamation of triumph escaped him.

But when he saw her raise his own rifle he uttered an oath and seized the rein he had dropped on his horse's neck.

"Hold!" cried a voice behind the girl, and a man sprung forward. "I have the best right to stop him. You don't want blood on your hands, Bessie, my child."

The girl almost gasped as she started from the man who had halted beside her.

It was her father!

"If he belongs to you, take him!" she said as her rifle came down.

The ranch-owner did not need these words to incite him to vengeance. He drew on Texas, and a second later the Indian horse came on riderless!

A dark object lay in the grass sixty yards away and the future mapped out by Texas would never be realized.

"We had to meet sometime," said Bodine slowly. "Fate was bound to bring us together!" and he added with a smile: "I would like to see him present certain papers to the governor now."

Bessie looked strangely at her parent as he uttered these words.

"You are the man!" she said. "You are the captain of the Iron Band; you stole—"

She stopped; his hand was on her arm.

"I am the man!" was the interruption. "I stole and killed, but I have found and avenged. Manuello's child is under her father's roof. I sold you for some compromising papers, but then I was a coward. When manhood returned—when I found the governor's child whose hand had been stolen by Big Horn Dick, who accidentally encountered her—I resolved to do what I could to make whole the past. I have repudiated the bargain Texas forced me to make. You know this now; the man out yonder in the grass proves it. I have yet another foe—Captain Bullet. He made my grave and gave me a ball; but, thanks to the bullet-proof waistcoat I have worn for years, I still live. Why do you look at the man in the grass, Bessie? Do you regret the bullet I gave him?"

"No," was the reply. "But we are going to have a visitor."

The ranch-owner followed the girl's glance.

A distant horse was carrying somebody toward them. In silence the twain watched the new-comer.

All at once the girl's eyes sparkled.

"It is the boy!" ejaculated Bodine, and when he looked at his child he saw the flush that made her youthful beauty the more striking. "You needn't tell old Jack Bodine what you're thinking about," he said laughing. "I've no objection. His father and I were rivals for the love of one woman; we quarreled; but I never spilled his blood. Captain Bullet did that. He won Clarida and I turned and loved your mother Clara, who had infatuated Captain Bullet, yet to fall by my hand. I did not know that the boy lived until he came to me a few days ago with a wound to be dressed, and then

I saw the tattoo mark that betrayed him. Give him more than a smile, Bessie, for his mother's sake. Don't let him throw his manhood away among the Comanches."

Little Topknot was warmly greeted as he came up, and a blush suffused his cheeks as Bessie put out her hand and spoke words that made his heart beat faster.

Explanations soon followed.

The youth had failed to find the trail of Texas, although he had hunted diligently for it since the death of Captain Bullet. At last, however, he had struck it to find the cave empty and the tenants gone.

Bodine started when he heard that the chief of the Red Hoods had perished.

"Well, you had the best right to him, boy," he said, after a moment's thought.

"The blood of Colonel Santa Fe, the best man that ever loved woman, was on his hands. We'll go down to Silver Valley and rebuild the old ranch."

"But White Lightning will not nicker at our coming," said Bessie with a sigh.

"Nor will Captain Bullet ride him any more," finished Bodine.

We are willing to leave all parties here.

A splendid home rose on the ruins of the old ranch and the grass grew green in Silver Valley again.

A brief year ago there was a wedding in the ranch-owner's home, and the acquaintance begun on the shaggy heads of a herd of buffaloes was cemented by the bonds of marriage.

And side by side at the ceremony stood two who had once been deadly foes—Jack Bodine Manuello.

The raider's camp on the Washita was broken up, for the three who had followed Captain Bullet from it found him among the Tinoso Mounds, shot in the eye!

Inez, the lost child, it is needless to say, found a lover, notwithstanding the cruel treatment she had received at the hands of Big Horn Dick, and not long after the wedding in Silver Valley, the ranch of Manuello, the ex-governor, echoed to the laughter of a bride.

The vendetta of the South-west exists no longer, for the silken cords of love have covered old hatreds; and Captain Bullet and his wild riders—Texas included—sleep their last sleep where they stole, killed and burned!

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